



A
FATED LOVE
TO END

HIS FEUD

DAPHNE BARNES

THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME

A Fated Love to End His Feud

A Clean Western Historical Romance Novel

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Ben was in a deep sleep when the sound of yelling stirred him.

It took him a few minutes to recognize the voices, but when he did, he bolted up in bed with worry.

His parents were fighting once again. Ben slipped out of bed soundlessly and moved to his door, cracking it open just a few inches.

The well-built farmhouse had a number of rooms down a long hallway from the kitchen. As Ben peered out, he could see his parents standing only a few feet apart, with grave expressions on their faces.

He was only ten years old, but for the last few years, he had far too many memories of his parents in conflict. They only ever warred with their words, but it was still distressing to Ben.

There was barely a time where he remembered his house being harmonious, but recently, things had become considerably worse.

“Don’t know how we’re gonna keep this ranch going,” his father stammered.

“Eli, would you just calm down? The children are sleeping!” Harriet returned.

“It’s those damn Larabees! We’re not gonna survive, Harriet. Not like this,” Eli shouted, followed by his wife shushing him.

Ben stood on his knees, holding the doorknob as he watched the scene

play out in the kitchen. He had seen many arguments this one before, but something that night felt a little different.

Perhaps it was the desperation in his father's angry voice, or the way his mother was rubbing her forehead without letting up. It all worried Ben.

"This fixation on the Larabees is going to be the end of you, Eli. I'm telling you now," Harriet warned as she shook her finger, her voice stern and forceful.

"I went down to Leonard's General Store. They're selling the Larabees' crops at half the price we sell ours for. Leonard told me so himself; he said, 'I'd be a fool to keep buying from you at your prices.' Well, now I'm the fool."

"How can they be making a profit? I just don't understand. And they put up a second home on the property, too," Harriet added.

"I don't know. They could've at least kept the prices close, but now I got no choice but to sell for peanuts. Less than peanuts!"

Eli stomped on the floor and swore, and Harriet chastised him.

"We need to start putting away stores for the winter, and I just don't know how we're going to have extra to save the amount we usually do." Eli was shaking his head again.

"But what about the cattle, Eli? Did you talk to the marshal?"

Ben had heard about the situation with the cattle. There had been a rustling some late night on the property and his parents had lost six heads, and no one in the area seemed to have any idea who was behind it.

But Ben knew his dad's suspicion.

"Marshal said they had no idea who might have perpetrated it this

time. When I suggested the Larabees, he looked at me like I had four heads, then laughed me out the door.

“I know it’s them, but ain’t nobody gonna believe me,” Eli went on. “We’re all alone in this, Harriet, and it don’t look good.”

The words upset Ben, and he felt his eyes well with tears. Seeing his parents this distraught had shaken him, and he felt anger toward the Larabees, the neighbors he’d known all his life.

Ben believed his father; he knew he was an honest man. If he said the Larabees were doing this all to target them, then that was the case.

But Ben was equal parts hurt and angry. The Larabees were the closest neighbor the Fieldses had in terms of proximity. Their ranch was the next one over, and technically closer to town, even if the houses that stood on each ranch were miles apart.

The two families should have been good friends, yet somewhere along the line their relations had soured and devolved into this muddled feud.

It was hard for Ben to understand, but he was sure things shouldn’t have been like this. Just like some of the kids he knew at the schoolroom in town, he thought he should’ve been friends with the Larabee boys, Patrick and Samuel. But his father wouldn’t hear of it.

When Ben was very young, he used to spend time with Patrick Larabee. They would run around near the river at the ends of their properties and skip stones, or chase one another, pretending to have revolvers.

They’d had such fun; Ben remembered some of those days vividly. That was before he remembered his parents ending nearly every day in a fight.

Then, one afternoon, his father had caught him and Patrick playing and had acted as though a crime had been committed, making sure

Ben never considered spending another minute with the neighbor boy again.

Ben was dragged back to the house with yelling and all sorts of recriminations he didn't understand. And since then, there had always been simmering conflict on the ranch.

He just couldn't understand why the Larabees were doing such dastardly stuff to his family. Why would anyone spend their time trying to sabotage someone else?

It was beyond him at such a young age. As far as he could see it, both ranches should have been able to operate as the town grew.

Ben was always hearing about new people arriving in town, and new towns being founded not too far away. Even though he was young, he paid attention to these things.

Surely there was enough demand for crops and beef and hides to keep both families in business. He just didn't understand the point of making trouble.

It was almost like the Larabees wanted the Fieldses to fail for their own amusement.

Why do the Larabees hate us so much? Ben was sure he would never understand. The feud had been going on so long, and it just seemed to be getting worse.

And his parents just seemed to be getting more upset and hopeless over each incident. Now, it almost sounded like something truly horrible was about to happen.

Could we lose everything? Where would we go and what would we do if we weren't here ranching? Ben was becoming increasingly upset the longer he thought about it all.

Just then, another door in the hallway opened. Ben was quick to move

the door to within a sliver of closing so he wouldn't be seen but was able to continue watching.

It was his brother Peter, who looked like he had just woken up from all the commotion.

Peter was five years older and was the apple of his parents' eyes. And he was everything Ben hoped he would be one day, too.

Smart, strapping, hardworking, and full of cheerfulness, Peter didn't seem to be afflicted with Ben's penchant for overthinking and worrying.

Ben watched Peter ruffle his hair, mussed from sleeping, as he casually walked toward the kitchen. As his parents noticed him, they hushed their arguing and gave him all their attention.

They watched and waited for Peter to say something, but instead of speaking, Peter just brought them both into a big hug. Seeing them embrace panged Ben's heart just a bit; sometimes he felt like an outsider in his own family, merely observing everything around him.

"All this midnight fighting is only going to make things worse," Peter said. Both his parents looked sorry and waited for him to continue speaking.

"We just need to put our heads together and come up with some ideas. Everything's gonna be okay. I'm sure of it."

His mother kissed Peter's head and then drew him closer. "My sweet boy, what did we do to deserve a son like you?"

"I'm sure it's the opposite, Ma." Peter chuckled.

"We need to forget about the Larabees and think about what we can do. Pa, did you reach out to the stores in the neighboring towns like we talked about?"

His father was nodding along to Peter's question.

"Well, good. What did they say?"

"They seemed interested in doing business and all, but what happens when the Larabees get wind of it? The same darned thing is just gonna repeat 'til no one will do business with us."

"Pa, you gotta just put the Larabees out of your mind. And how are they gonna know unless we go around talking about it?"

Peter had a bit of smirk on his face and Eli finally cracked, patting Peter on the back.

"Good point, son. We'll all keep tight-lipped. Now, what else did you have in mind?"

"Well, we gotta just think of new avenues, that's all. Instead of taking cattle to the market north, why don't we try south? As for the rustling, that's harder..." Peter trailed off.

"I don't expect you to solve it all, son," Eli said.

"Let me get us all a drink," Harriet suggested as she rifled through the ice box.

"We can put up a new fence, Pa. Or get us a dog. Or even a minder to keep watch over night—or I could do it myself."

"Oh, Peter. No—no way. We're not putting you in harm's way, especially given it's those Larabees. They've got no morals."

"I'll do whatever needs to be done, Ma. This ranch ain't going anywhere."

Peter's words were so meaningful that both his parents immediately brought him into a tight hug. And Ben watched on, not sure what he was feeling.

At some point, his amazement over Peter was replaced by the realization of his own inadequacy. He had a hard time feeling so happy about the ease with which Peter could swoop in to solve all his parents' problems.

It wasn't that he didn't want Peter to help—he did—but Ben wished he could be a part of it. Instead, he felt like a bump on a log—a son who wasn't much help at all.

Ben's heart had a habit of sinking low in his chest whenever his parents lavished affection on Peter. And the looks in their eyes while he spoke—Ben was sure it was as though all the pride they had to give was expended on Peter alone.

That was okay, though, because he knew he couldn't stack up to Peter. He wasn't quick on his feet like Peter was.

He didn't have ideas brimming in his head, nor did he have the cheerful, can-do attitude that Peter seemed to exude, no matter how tired he was.

Some days, Ben felt like Peter was everything he wasn't.

He continued to watch as his family's voices grew softer and they sat around the table, talking calmly. He couldn't make it all out, but he could tell Peter was giving them more ideas about how to take care of the ranch and protect it from the Larabees.

His parents looked relieved and hopeful, and even though Ben should have been happy that the conflict had died down and he could return to sleep, he didn't quite feel that way.

If Peter solved all their problems, Ben wasn't sure where that left him. Perhaps he could learn to work closely along with Peter and be more like him.

Perhaps that was the only way forward, and the only way to get noticed by his parents.

Yet, one day, Ben hoped things would be different. Since Peter was growing up to be the kind of man he wanted to be, Ben dreamed of saving the ranch with him—of helping their parents together and getting a sliver of that pride and recognition he always saw in their eyes.

And if he could help put a stop to the Larabees, it would prove once and for all that Ben was worthy of being their son.

The wagon rolled along at such a slow pace that Sadie's frustration grew. This horse may have been different, but she was riding in the same wagon she'd always ridden in when her mother up and left a town in search of new work.

It had been the same for as long as Sadie could remember. It had become a routine she dreaded—arriving somewhere and struggling to make friends, then leaving abruptly and eventually having to introduce herself to a new host of children.

It felt like every few months she was starting her life over, and it had tired her.

This time, her mother had secured a new job on the other side of New York state, where a factory was opening, and there were jobs for both women.

Now that Sadie was twenty years old, her mother had insisted it was time for her to work, too, and contribute to their living expenses.

She kept saying that having an extra income would mean a better home and better everything, but Sadie didn't quite believe that.

Her mother had worked her way through at least two dozen jobs in Sadie's two decades of life, and regardless of the wages, Sadie had never seen her life get better.

In a handful of months, she would in all likelihood be back in this

very wagon, moving on to the next opportunity that promised some elusive better life.

“This one’s going to be it, Sadie. And you’re really going to like working. Bringing home a bit of money, being able to buy things once and a while.

“Of course, you’ll need to be saving, because we just don’t know what might happen.”

Sadie’s mother was a hard woman named Vera. She had wrinkles beyond her years and rough hands from decades of manual labor.

Her patience was lost years ago to circumstance, with Sadie’s father never having been in the picture. She didn’t know any extended family; all she knew was her mother and a string of towns.

Sadie just nodded. She didn’t want to tell her mother her thoughts because she knew they’d anger her. Instead, she watched the countryside roll by slowly.

It felt like she was going from nowhere to some other version of nowhere. It was hopeless.

She thought back to the last place where she’d felt she truly belonged — a Pennsylvania factory town whose name Sadie couldn’t remember.

Sadie had been just ten years old, but she and her mother had moved so frequently up and down the East coast Sadie felt older than the other children she met in each town.

But in Pennsylvania, Sadie had believed things were changing. She and her mother had been there nearly five months, which was a record for Vera.

Sadie had built easy friendships, and she had finally gotten over the fear that her mother would wake her in the middle of the night and announce they were leaving; that was usually how it had happened.

Sadie had started sleeping soundly every night and was enjoying her mornings in the schoolroom with a teacher who actually remembered her name.

The town had felt like home to Sadie, or at least what she imagined having a home must be like. The row of brick houses where they had lived was where most of her friends lived, too, and there was always someone around to play a game with or take a walk with.

In other towns, she'd barely stayed long enough to make real friends—the kind of friends who knew her well and expected her in the morning to walk to school and then waited for her before walking home.

She had a place with the girls in that Pennsylvania town, and Sadie had loved it.

Often, she had thought about how she wanted to stay there forever—to grow a bit older, find herself a job and get married so she could start her own family. She wanted daughters just like the girls who sat around her.

It was a happiness she had never known before. That was what it felt like to belong—and Sadie had finally experienced it.

Now, she wasn't sure she'd ever experience that feeling again.

A few hours later, when they finally arrived at their destination in western New York, Vera drove the wagon down the main thoroughfare of the town.

Sadie took in what she could of the place where they would live for a while, at least.

It looked like so many towns they had resided in before—a handful of shops and one or two eateries. This particular town had rows of brick houses on small streets surrounding the main shops, which made it feel a little more built up than others.

Sadie wondered if it was a more prosperous town than the ones they'd visited before.

When Vera stopped the wagon to get her bearings, Sadie noticed a nice-sized home with a wraparound porch just off the thoroughfare. On it sat several ladies engaged in a quilting bee.

Sadie's hopes soared as she saw the women smiling and laughing together. It seemed like the town had a friendly community, and that was something she longed for.

"Ma, why don't we join the quilting bee over there? I'm sure they'd be glad to have us, and it could help us to get to know what the town's like."

Sadie was already fixing her skirt and collecting a bag to head over to the porch when her mother placed a hand on her arm.

"No, Sadie, that's not for us." Vera rolled her eyes as she spoke, too, and it just fueled Sadie's temper.

"Why not?"

"We don't know how long we'll be here. It doesn't make sense to waste our energy getting to know these people."

Sadie could scream at her mother's words. It seemed like she was determined to spend her life as an itinerant, flitting from town to town and never laying any roots, and she was equally happy not ever really knowing *anyone*.

Sadie knew she couldn't continue this way. She was reaching her breaking point.

"And why can't we stay? Be honest with me, Mother. For once, can't we just decide to stay here, no matter what happens?"

Vera looked at her and tutted like Sadie was an errant schoolchild.

“We have to follow the money. I thought you understood this. Our best chance in life is to go where the best opportunities are. That means we need to be ready to leave at short notice.”

Sadie shook her head, tired of the words she’d heard her mother speak so many times before.

“How is this a good life? How is leaving everyone and everything we know every few months a decent life?”

“What on earth are you saying, Sadie?” Her mother’s voice sounded angrier than usual.

“I can’t keep doing this. I need to stay in one place. To know people, make friends... start a real life.”

Vera shook her head and tutted again.

“You’re terribly ungrateful. Don’t you see everything I’ve done for you? Every opportunity I’ve followed has been for you—to give *you* a better life.”

“But it hasn’t been a better life,” was all Sadie said. She didn’t want to get into an overblown argument, especially as they had just arrived in this new town.

All small towns had watchful eyes, and Sadie was sure someone was peeping them as they argued in the wagon.

Not waiting for her mother to respond, Sadie jumped off the wagon and stormed away.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the day she’d had to leave the town in Pennsylvania. It should have been just like every other time they left, except it hadn’t been.

This one had hurt so much more.

“The factory closed, Sadie,” she recalled her mother saying. “Nearly everyone in this godforsaken town is now out of work, Lord, help them.

“But we can’t stick around to see what happens. We’ve got to keep moving.”

It was like a dam had burst as the tears fell from Sadie’s eyes. The story was always the same. Her mother could never keep a job, or the job itself would disappear into thin air.

This time, it had seemed an entire factory would be no more.

Sadie was too young at the time to understand why those things happened, but she remembered thinking they happened too often to her mother—though she never dared voice that thought.

Instead, she had remained quiet and distraught, sulking in a corner of the covered wagon. She didn’t think she could speak without letting out a sob, and she was sure her mother wouldn’t appreciate it.

Vera had always taught her to be strong in the face of whatever life threw at her, and as much as Sadie tried to live up to that, it wasn’t getting any easier when she kept having everything she cared about torn away from her.

She’d never known what a home felt like before that town in Pennsylvania. It had been the first place where she’d felt happy, the first place where she had felt a part of something.

But Sadie had quickly discovered that had been a fantasy. They would never stay anywhere long enough for her to truly belong.

And Sadie had finally understood it that day in Pennsylvania.

The memory stung Sadie hard, and she wiped away her tears. She’d never truly known community before, and now she was questioning everything.

Why couldn't her mother have tried for another job in the same town? No one else had gone running out of town, so why did they have to? Would Vera do the same thing here?

And if she did, Sadie had to ask herself, would she be able to go with her mother and start all over once again? How long would they keep doing this?

It almost seemed like Vera wanted to keep moving; it seemed she was the one who couldn't settle. But Sadie couldn't stand the idea of not settling any longer.

She hated the idea of her mother moving on without her, but Sadie was never going to belong anywhere or have a family of her own if she kept letting her mother shuffle her off to their next destination.

Sadie had a decision to make, and it wasn't going to be an easy one.

Leaves rustled around the grave marker that bore the name ‘Peter Fields.’ Ben stood in front of it, staring at the humble wooden cross, while behind him his parents were huddled together, sobbing, in the brisk autumn air.

Peter had died yesterday after a long, drawn-out illness that had tortured them all. And now, as he lay there to rest, Ben was finding it difficult to say goodbye.

At twenty-two, Ben still felt like he was walking in his brother’s footsteps and his shadow. He led all the farming on the ranch personally and did a fair amount of the work with his own two hands.

Some days, Ben felt like he was slow as molasses in comparison. And he knew his father thought so; he could see his frustration and the looks of disapproval as he worked at times.

It was as though his father wanted two of Peter, and Ben couldn’t blame him. But now Peter had passed, and it felt like their entire world was upended.

“How will we ever keep the ranch going now?” Harriet sobbed, with her voice quiet but more than loud enough for Ben to hear. The words seared his heart.

He should have been angry, but instead he felt the same fear within him, as much as it pained him. Peter had been the heart of their operations on the ranch, and he was almost sure he was the reason the

Larabees hadn't succeeded in any of the wild plans to ruin their business.

Peter had met every incident undaunted.

Eli stepped beside Ben and patted his back. "He was a great son. I'm not sure how we're going to carry on without him. He very nearly had the Larabees by the throat, and now..."

He patted Ben's back once more and then stepped away.

A mix of emotions swirled inside Ben. Peter had always been the one to stay one step ahead of the Larabees, and all with a smile on his face, and he was the one his father trusted the most.

When cattle went missing, it was Peter whom Eli called to run through the fields on horseback. And when he needed to speak to the marshal, even though everyone was certain it would prove fruitless, it was Peter whom he called to accompany him.

It used to irk Ben and make him envious, but when Peter became sick and his father still didn't call on him for help, Ben began to worry his father would never believe in him.

Now that Peter was gone, Ben knew he had to fill his brother's shoes somehow, but he had no idea how he would do it.

He had to keep the ranch going, or all of Peter's work would be for nothing. And he had to win his parents' trust.

"We can't give up," Ben found himself muttering.

"No one's giving up, son. But we've got to face facts. Peter's gone, and next time the Larabees pull something, we're gonna be up the creek with no paddle."

Ben could feel the exasperation in his father. He knew the man had toiled for a lifetime in face of the Larabees' meddling and felt no

closer to resolving the longstanding feud.

Ben saw the toll it took on him. Eli looked older than his years and permanently tired. All Ben wanted to do was to fix it all somehow, but he didn't know if he could.

And he didn't know if his parents would have enough faith in him to let him try.

Feeling a bit courageous, he took his mother's hand. "Ma, let's head on home."

She nodded while dabbing at her tears with a white handkerchief. He linked his arm in hers as she said goodbye to Peter once more, and the two turned to begin the walk back to the ranch.

It would be a half-hour walk, but each welcomed the time and space after the difficult events of the past few days.

As they walked, Eli trailed behind, grumbling to himself. Ben knew he was grief-stricken, as they all were, but he wished his father could put aside his anger even for a few hours.

Sometimes it felt like his entire life was about the Larabees—what the Larabees were doing or not doing, what crime they'd been free to commit this time, or what new dastardly plan they were concocting with the Fieldses in mind now.

It almost felt ludicrous, but strange things always happened. Cattle would go missing, crops would be ruined, and whenever they lost business, it seemed the ones benefiting were the Larabees.

It made Ben angry if he thought about it for too long, but today of all days he wanted to think of a new way forward, not dwell on his or his father's ire.

"Can I help you with supper, Ma?" Ben offered. He knew his mother hadn't been in the mindset to cook for the last few days.

“No, darling. You just wash up when you get in and be ready to eat.”

“Sure thing, Ma.”

“You can set the places at the table,” Harriet added. She was patting his arm as they walked on, arm in arm. “One less place, is all.”

He hated hearing how shattered she sounded as she spoke, but Ben knew saying it out loud was just one way to cope with the reality.

It would hurt him to set three places at the table going forward, but Peter had been sick for so long, he couldn’t remember the last time he had even set four places.

When Peter had first been sick, no one had thought it would last. During the first week, they were certain he would be back up running the ranch as he always did, chipper as ever.

And for a short while he did, but then the illness returned. It affected his breathing and made it impossible for him to do much at all, even though at first, he’d insisted he was fine.

Soon, he was spending most days in bed, struggling to catch his breath, and the doctor began making daily house calls.

The last few months were nothing short of agony, for Peter and the rest of his family. Seeing Peter struggle for breath had torn Ben apart. It was like seeing a Titan fall.

And when he passed, a part of Ben felt peace for his brother being able to rest at last.

After walking for nearly twenty minutes, the Larabees’ property came into view and Ben’s stomach tightened.

It wasn’t possible to walk to their ranch without passing the place, but even though it was something he should have been used to, today of all days he didn’t want to see the sight.

It was just a reminder of all the injustices they had suffered as a family, and Ben wasn't sure he could take much more before he hit a breaking point.

As they passed the property, Ben heard his father's mutterings ramp up in volume and speed. He clasped his mother tightly to him and tried to hurry their pace, but he knew it was a good ten minutes before they would arrive at their homestead.

He rushed Harriet along as best he could regardless, but soon two figures became visible. It was Patrick Larabee and his wife, and they were walking in his direction.

Ben's heart sank, wondering if they were taking the opportunity to add insult to injury.

Ben had known Patrick his whole life, but they had barely spoken since being dragged away from each other as children. Both knew the risk of association wasn't worth it, even in their loneliness on vast California ranches.

Over time, what was an avoidance grew into a dislike that intensified year on year. Now, Ben could barely stand the sight of Patrick.

He couldn't reconcile all the horrible deeds Patrick and his family had carried out with the boy he used to run around with by the river that lay at the back of their properties. Ben had no idea what kind of man he had become, but he wasn't any man he respected.

"Come on, Ma. Let's get a move on," Ben whispered. He was sure she must have seen the couple approaching by now, and he didn't want her to be disturbed.

"Mrs. Fields? I'm so terribly sorry for your loss. Please, I baked this bread just this afternoon."

Patrick's wife held out a loaf of bread wrapped in a tea towel. She and Patrick stopped just a few feet from Ben and his mother. Ben had no

intention to stop, but his mother did.

She stilled and reached out to take the bread, looking taken aback by the act of kindness.

“Well, I don’t know what to say...” Harriet trailed off.

“I sure do,” came Eli’s gruff voice.

Ben watched it all play out in stunned silence.

“How dare you offer anything to my wife on this day of all days. Our son is dead and buried, no thanks to you all.”

Ben noticed the looks of horror on the young couple’s faces. They must have thought the Fieldses would be defenseless on such a day.

“Hey now, that’s crossing a line,” Patrick said. His wife looked worried, as though she didn’t understand what she had done wrong.

“You and yours spent all these years coming after us, working my boy to the bone. And look what happened. You Larabees saw him into an early grave.

“See how that weighs on your conscience now.” Eli was livid as he spoke, shaking his fingers in both Larabees’ faces.

“Eli,” Harriet admonished. It was clear she felt he had crossed a line, too.

“No, they need to hear this. Your parents been after us for years. And now you probably are, too. I ain’t gonna stand for it no more. You better watch yourselves.”

“Be careful what you say, old man,” Patrick said, scoffing.

Ben was dying to intervene, to say something to shut up Patrick and remind him who he was up against, but Ben couldn’t. He could be

impulsive, but today just wasn't a day he could let himself go.

He wasn't a violent person, nor a mean person, and such direct conflict didn't bring much out in him except distaste and a desire to walk away. And, as far as Ben was concerned, this wasn't what Peter would have wanted for the day.

"Come on, Ma, let's get a move on," was what he said instead.

Eli huffed in the direction of Patrick and his wife, and the three of them left the couple standing on their property.

Once the three arrived at their house, Ben made sure his mother was all right given the events on the Larabees' property. When he had given her a tall jar of water and was sure she wasn't too vexed, he left her to wash up and ready for dinner.

As he headed to the water closet, he saw his father pacing the parlor, a dram of whiskey in his hand. He was muttering again, and as much as it pained Ben to see the angry old man he was becoming, he let Eli be.

There was nothing Ben could do to relieve his father's agony and fury, at least not at that moment.

As he washed away the remains of the day and tried to calm himself, Ben couldn't help thinking about the most pressing problem. Peter's illness had hindered the ranch's operation, yet they had just managed to get by.

But it was easier when they knew it was only temporary. When it became clear in the past few weeks that Peter would not recover, tasks had begun to slip, and Ben was nearly sick thinking about the amount of work that had piled up and remained incomplete.

There were horses that needed grooming, stalls that badly needed mucking out, cattle that needed to be run and then surveyed, and that was just the livestock. There were also crops to reap and other fields

to sow, and then some others to prepare for fallow.

Ben was getting dizzy thinking about it all. He had never been a natural at leading work on the ranch like Peter, but he'd have to figure it out somehow.

With only three people on the ranch, Ben was certain they didn't have any hope of staying on top of the work. His father and mother were aging and there were just some tasks they couldn't do, not to mention his mother had to keep focused on running the house itself.

The more Ben thought about it, the clearer it seemed that only one viable option would yield quick results. It wasn't something he had thought a lot about, but it had sat at the back of his head for some time.

He knew a few men in town had done it, so it wasn't unheard of. And he was sure his parents would support his decision—they might even grow confidence in him because of it, too.

Once he was washed and dressed, he set the table as his mother had requested. Even though he set three places, Ben still left a space for Peter.

He thought it better to put the plates where they always sat than try to erase that space. Ben made up the table swiftly and allowed his mind to drift to another task.

Seeing the table was satisfactory, he slunk back to his room to find some paper and an ink pen. Sitting at the small desk in his room, he began writing what would be a mail-order bride advertisement for the matrimonial pages on the East coast.

Ben hadn't thought much about marriage growing up. His parents' marriage had been filled with conflict for as long he remembered, and so such a future wasn't something he had aspired to have.

Yet, he knew a partnership had its practical advantages, and those

advantages were exactly what Ben needed, and quickly.

With another person in the house helping, he was sure he could return the ranch to a good operating state and find a way to combat the problems the Larabees were causing. He'd never be able to deal with them if he was always one step behind in the diverse work on the ranch.

Finding a suitable bride who could help with some house chores as well as ranch duties was the best way forward. It was terribly unromantic, Ben knew, but he had never considered romance much in his life.

There must be someone looking for a fitting arrangement that would be mutually beneficial. Someone who wanted to start a life in California on a busy ranch, and maybe even build a family of their own.

As he wrote his ad, Ben knew it was all a bit sudden, but the rush of change was spurring him forward. He'd given very little thought to all these things, but now all the possibilities were whirling around.

Starting his own family with a mail-order bride would help solve his family's biggest problem—taking care of the ranch—but it would also open a new world to Ben.

With hope in his heart, Ben wrote out the best ad he could muster. It was short and a little abrupt, but it was honest.

He just hoped there would be a lady somewhere who felt the advertisement spoke to her.

In the morning, he would take the ad to Leonard's General Store for posting to the paper. When finished, Ben put the ad in his drawer for safekeeping and returned to the kitchen.

As difficult as the day was, he would eat dinner with his family and get through it. Tomorrow was another day.

Sadie needed some space from her mother to regain her composure.

They were fighting again, as usual. Since their argument the day they had arrived in town, Vera and Sadie couldn't seem to agree on anything.

Sadie just couldn't continue on the way things were, and there had to be something she could do about it. She was a grown woman now, of working age, and that meant she could start making her own choices.

At least, that was how she saw it.

She needed a chance to build a real home, to join a community and have some real friends and even a family of her own.

Sadie walked past the home where the quilting bee happened each afternoon and gave a look at all the ladies. They chatted with such ease as they worked their quilting squares.

One even smiled at Sadie as she passed, giving her such a conflicted feeling.

She could stay here in this town and just refuse to leave when her mother had decided she'd had enough and found the next opportunity.

It would be an explosive fight, and her mother would leave on bad terms, but Sadie was sure that in time Vera would come to accept her

decision.

She might even have a change of heart eventually and return.

Or she could do as she had always done and followed her mother to the next town, and the next, and the next...

Thinking it over, Sadie sat on a bench in front of the town's general store. It was a cute town, and it seemed like people there had some money.

It was rare to see benches along the thoroughfare in factory towns.

As she sat, her energy started to wane, and Sadie looked around, wondering what she should do next. She only had a minute amount of money on her, so she'd need to return to her mother before long, but the longer she could leave it, the better it would be.

She wanted her mother to know she was serious about what she'd said, and not just overcome by her emotions.

Beside her was a paper of some sort someone had left behind. Out of curiosity, Sadie picked it up and started leafing through the pages.

It seemed the factory was big news in town and was expected to create many jobs and a surge in the town's population. On the next page, she saw the details of a harvest festival where quilts made by those in town and surrounding areas would be displayed.

It panged her heart to read it. What would it be like, participating in something like that—making a quilt with women she counted as friends and then showing it off to the community?

It seemed like something that should be so routine, but to Sadie it seemed like an impossible dream.

As she turned to the back page, she found the matrimonial listings. There, countless ads from men looking for wives were listed.

Sadie read and began to blush at some of the men's words.

Seeking a beautiful woman to wed and start a large family with... Oh dear, not quite right. Successful farmer seeking a woman to marry and keep a tidy house. Must be hardworking.

A lot of the ads felt like job advertisements to her, but then Sadie saw one that piqued her interest:

Californian rancher seeking a hardworking bride who will always put family first, for help running a successful ranch and farm.

It was short compared to most of the other ads, but there was something about it that called to Sadie. She couldn't help but feel she needed to answer it to see what might happen.

Immediately, she searched her bag for some extra paper. A long time ago, Sadie had learned to keep everything useful and important with her in her bag because she never knew when her mother would pull her away to some new destination.

She had lost countless belongings over the years before she had decided to keep the significant things at her side. Now, it was paying off, as she could write to Ben Fields without her mother being any the wiser.

Dear Ben,

Your advertisement caught my attention immediately. I am a woman who wishes to have a family of my own, one that I can nurture and care for above all else.

Family is the most important thing to me. I would love nothing more than to care for a home that houses a loving family and to work hard on a ranch that keeps that family in good stead.

I'm a young woman of twenty years used to an independent lifestyle, but I long for a family of my own. I have traveled quite a bit along the East

coast as my mother sought working opportunities to better our lives.

Seeing how terribly hard my mother works, I can say that I value hard work as well and have been shown the importance of a good day's labor. I would be proud to work on a family ranch.

I would like it ever so much if you would consider returning my letter with your thoughts. Perhaps we might discuss the details of your ranch and your family. Is it a large family?

Should you wish to write me back, you can use the return address on this envelope.

Sincerely,

Sadie Jackson



Two days later, Sadie mailed the letter after receiving the first of her wages from her new factory job. It was a tiny consolation prize for starting a new life she wasn't sure she wanted, yet she was grateful for the wages.

She and her mother had returned to speaking terms shortly after she rejoined her the first day they came to town, and Sadie had been surprised that their new home was a little larger and had more windows than any place they had lived before.

If Ben never wrote her back, Sadie could see herself staying, though in her heart, she was keeping hope that he might.

Over the next few weeks, Sadie concentrated on saving her wages and learning as much as she could about living independently of her mother.

She'd found out how much the home cost per week and was working to ensure that if her mother wanted to leave in two months' time, she

would have saved enough to stay on her own.

Sadie had also made it a habit to do all the shopping for her and her mother, so she understood the cost of everything and could plan for supporting herself, even if she suddenly lost her job at the factory.

And as she learned these skills, she felt even more frustration at her mother's choices. It wasn't easy working as a woman to support yourself—she could see that—but she could also see how her mother's choices had made everything much harder than it had to be.

Maybe Sadie wasn't destined to be a well-to-do woman with a beautiful home, but she was certain she could make a decent life for herself.

One Saturday morning, Sadie was shopping for groceries at the general store, as she always did. But when she reached the counter, the store's owner had a funny smile on his face.

"I have something for you," he said as he pushed small glasses up the bridge of his nose.

Sadie blushed for a minute, wondering what on earth he could mean. But when he produced a letter on the counter, she blushed even harder.

It seemed Ben Fields had taken the time to return her letter.

After completing her purchases, she sat on the bench in front of the store to read his reply.

Dear Sadie,

I thought I would write you back because what you said about family seems to align with my feelings, too. I love my family dearly; they mean the world to me.

I have a mother, Harriet, who tends to our home and feeds us delicious

meals, and a father, Eli, who was the one who founded this ranch.

I also have a brother, Peter, who passed and whose spirit still inspires me.

I want to do great things for them, and I only hope I can. It seems we might just want the same things.

The ranch is quite vast, and it counts several types of livestock and crops amongst its activities. I hope I can lead it well, and having a bride who has the same mindset would make the work easier.

I love ranching with all my heart, though truly, my heart belongs to my family. I just want to give my parents a good life, and I hope maybe one day I can.

It might be tough, and maybe I won't achieve everything I want to, but I really must try.

You sound like a hard-working woman and someone well suited to practical life on a ranch. Is it something you could commit yourself to? Would you like the ranching life?

Sincerely,

Ben Fields

Sadie couldn't help but smile from ear to ear as she read his reply. It was clear how much he loved and cared for his family; he spoke about them with such pride.

She felt a little embarrassed knowing she had never written so lovingly about her only family in this world, her mother.

Yet, Sadie felt so hopeful reading Ben's words. She wanted to meet a man who was as serious about family as she was.

In truth, she didn't know what it was like to have a real family—one consisting of several different people, all with their own wants and

desires and in need of care and kindness.

It was hard to see her mother in this light, and again she felt a little guilty, especially considering the hand her mother was dealt in life. However, Sadie knew that if she found a way to find happiness, she could share that with her mother, even at a distance.

It would change their relationship fundamentally.

Reading the letter once more, she considered his words carefully. She didn't want to get her hopes too high, but Ben seemed like a man who could give her the life she desperately wanted.

She wasn't afraid of hard work, and she was undaunted by taking his parents on as family of her own; it was a privilege she would savor.

As passionate as he was about his family, Sadie noticed Ben seemed uncertain about achieving his goals and had meandered a bit in his letter. It seemed he was ambitious but wasn't sure if everything would happen the way he hoped it would.

She could relate to that, and she secretly hoped that maybe the help of a loving wife might change his mindset. Sadie imagined Ben might be stressed from running a ranch on his own, and she couldn't help fantasizing about him growing more confident with her by his side.

No one was perfect; Sadie knew this well. She hadn't written to Ben expecting him to be a character out of a book, ready and able to rescue her from a life she had grown to abhor.

Instead, he was a person just like herself, with desires and insecurities. Sadie could take it all in stride because his commitment to his family was clear.

That was all Sadie ever wanted—to make a commitment to a place and people, to have a family of her own and to belong. It seemed to her Ben could be that family.

It was nearly seven in the evening when Ben finally made it to the barn to muck out the horses' stalls and give them a quick grooming. He was still days behind in his work, but there was something keeping his attitude positive despite the dire situation.

Ben had been exchanging letters with Sadie for a little while now, and every time a new letter came, it gave him a boost. For the first time he could remember, he found himself smiling while working and his energy was rising instead of flagging.

His new resolve reminded him of Peter, too, which only made him smile more.

It had been nearly a month and a half since Peter passed, and the situation on the ranch hadn't exactly been improving, despite Ben's good moods.

He and his mother and father were still in the throes of grief, and Ben could tell his parents thought the end of the ranch was nearing. Ben hadn't mentioned anything about writing to Sadie; he didn't want to get their hopes up or face their criticism over his decision.

Instead, he would wait to see what happened, and if she were to be joining them, he would inform them.

More than anything, Ben wanted to look like he was mature and organized. For too long, he had been the type of person to overthink things and assume the worst.

Ever since he'd thrown caution to the wind and wrote to Sadie, however, the effect of the optimism he gained had been something he was happy to ride given the state of things.

It didn't resolve his grief and sadness; he missed Peter every day. But it gave Ben so much hope—hope that things on the ranch could be different. That his life could be different.

With every letter Sadie sent, Ben was increasingly impressed with her, too. She was a hardworking woman as she had just started a factory job and was saving her money.

And she'd traveled extensively, too. At first, that fact had made Ben a bit uneasy, but soon he could tell from her letters that Sadie was a serious woman with ambitions, just like him.

It seemed she wanted to commit herself to family life and would rather work on a ranch than in a factory, and Ben thought that made sense. He just hoped that if Sadie did become his wife, the Fields ranch was just the kind of ranch she had in mind.

Despite the budding relationship between him and Sadie that was keeping Ben positive, the feud with the Larabees was only intensifying, and in some ways Ben was shocked. He couldn't believe that in the wake of his brother's death, the Larabees would show no mercy.

First, they had made their disingenuous show of sympathy when the family had walked home from laying him to rest, and then more of their cattle had been rustled. When Ben and his father had counted the heads that morning, another three were missing.

Eli hadn't minced words as he shouted and swore up a storm so early that morning.

"Those damned Larabees! What do they think they're doing? They think they can rustle the entire herd away, a few head at a time. Why, the nerve of them!"

It seemed bizarre to Ben but there was no other explanation. The Larabees lived at the next ranch, and their cattle grazing lands stretched far in the opposite direction.

The only way he or his father could get a good look at their herd would be to trespass, and neither of them were interested in taking the risk—especially not when they knew Old Man Larabee had a shotgun or two on his property.

“Pa,” Ben had said at the time, “don’t you think it’s weird they’re after our cattle?”

Asking the question had proved a mistake as Eli just flapped and shook his head. “Son, what you don’t know about ranching could fill this entire field.

“Cattle are worth a pretty penny, and it’s not just the value. It’s the darned pride of it all. No man likes to have his cattle rustled away—it’s a sure sign of weakness.

“That’s why Larabee keeps on doing it. A real insult.”

Eli had huffed and started walking back to the house, leaving Ben to see to the herd and stew in his regret. Sometimes it seemed like he still never could do or say the right things.

Peter wouldn’t have asked such a silly question, he thought. Peter would have thought up some ingenious plan to get the cattle back or catch the rustlers.

Ben racked his brain for a minute to do just that, but instead he only came up with anxieties. It would be too dangerous to spend the night in the field, watching over the cattle.

Not only would his mother object to the idea on principle, but there was no way his father would trust him to stay safe.

As he brushed down their youngest horse, Ben couldn’t help but sour

as he remembered that day. Every time a cattle rustle or some other such thing happened, his father went to the marshal to report it.

And every time, the marshal laughed him away, not believing for a second the Larabees had anything to do with it. Except this time, when Eli had visited with the marshal, the Larabees were also there making a complaint of their own.

When he had returned home, Eli had told Harriet and Ben they were all accused of killing chickens on the Larabee ranch in the dead of night.

“Well, that’s just darned absurd. How could they think we’d do something like that?” Harriet had questioned.

“The only time we ever set foot on that ranch was to confront the Larabees over their misdeeds,” Ben had added.

“I sure know that, but the marshal, well, he ain’t one to be swayed. Seems he always takes the Larabees’ side and won’t take any of my complaints seriously.

“I’m real tired of it,” Eli squawked. “They’re just a bunch of liars, trying to make us look as bad as them. We all know we didn’t go near those chicken coops.”

“Right, Pa,” Ben had insisted. As angry as the family would get at times over the actions of the Larabees, they had always agreed to never stoop to their level to cause problems.

They’d confront them and use harsh words, but never would they ever do one malicious thing to their ranch or property or person. The Fieldses just weren’t those kinds of people.

Once Ben finished taking care of the horses, the sun had long set. It was late September, and the cool air and early sunset were reminding him that winter wasn’t far off.

There was an unbelievable amount of work to be done for the fall harvest, and just thinking about it turned Ben's stomach. Realistically, he didn't think the three of them could handle all the work in a timely fashion.

He was sure some crops would spoil before they were harvested, but he hadn't said a word to his parents. Ben figured they must have known; they were more experienced than he was.

Returning to the house, Ben felt his stomach growl at the smell of roasted beef wafting from the kitchen.

"Twenty minutes 'til supper, Ben. Why don't you get washed up?"

"Sure thing, Ma," he returned.

"Oh, and Ben..." Harriet said. "Leonard came all the way out to the ranch to drop this letter off for ya. Must be important."

Ben could see a faint bit of interest in his mother's eyes, but he could also see how awash she still was with grief. It had been hard for her to keep up any normal conversation since Peter had passed, unless it was anger and ire at the Larabees.

She just couldn't keep her interest in menial or happy things all the same.

"Thanks, Ma."

He took the letter and kept the giddiness that rose in his chest to himself. It wasn't that he thought she would really notice, but Ben still wanted to keep things as private as he could until he knew what their future was.

When he was alone in his room after washing, Ben sat and read Sadie's letter.

Dear Ben,

I hope this letter finds you well despite your busy days on the ranch. It seems you never get much time for rest, yet you keep finding time to write to me.

I would be less than honest if I said I wasn't flattered that you're still making time for me. Writing to you has become my favorite part of my weeks and days.

The job at the factory is rather intensive, but seeing my savings grow little by little every day keeps motivating me. My greatest dream now is to finally settle in one town and stay there for the rest of my life.

I want a family of my own and to start planting roots so that by the time I'm reaching the end of my days, I can see several generations of my family in one place. Perhaps it's a fanciful dream, but it's what I want more than anything.

Maybe this town will be it, but even if it's not, I will have saved enough to choose where I will lay down those roots.

Tell me, how are your mother and father faring? And how is the ranch? I so enjoy hearing about your family's life and how you work together every day.

Sincerely,

Sadie

Ben smiled as he kept the letter in his hands, even after reading it. Sadie's letters were always such a breath of fresh air to him, full of liveliness and brightness, and he wondered if that was why he felt so renewed and determined after reading them.

It was clear Sadie was ready for the commitment of a family, and she was unwavering in her desire to make a family of her own. Ben couldn't help thinking of all the help he and his family needed, especially his mother.

With another woman in the home, the chores of the home could be halved, and more time could be spent where the ranch and farm were falling behind.

His mother was experienced in harvesting crops. With Sadie around, she could spend time ensuring none of the crops were spoiled, while Sadie could tend to the home.

Ben's mind was running now thinking of the possibilities. Sadie sounded so hardworking, he was sure she could learn to work with the animals and tend to the gardens in no time.

An impulse was driving him to act suddenly, and he couldn't keep it at bay. Sadie's letters were the one thing giving him buoyancy, given the miserable state of the ongoing feud and the ever-present sense of loss.

Grabbing some paper, Ben sat at his desk and held his pen in anticipation. This was the right step; he was sure of it. There was no point in wasting more time, as far as he was concerned.

Dearest Sadie,

I hope you don't mind me using such an affectionate term to greet you, but your last letter brought so much clarity into my day that I felt it warranted.

It filled me with joy to hear how determined you are to start a great new life, and one where you would settle in one place, making a grand commitment. If I may be so bold, I wish to ask if you would make that commitment with me, here, in California with my family.

Would you be my wife and help take the family ranch from good to great?

Ben's letter of proposal wasn't terribly long, but when he read it back to himself, he could feel his excitement in his words and in his script.

His words were practically bouncing off the page. After making his proposal, he asked her to consider joining him immediately on the ranch.

And it was a risk; he could have spent more time ensuring she would be receptive to his proposal, but Ben liked to act on impulse when an idea came to him.

For too long, while growing up, he was sidelined and felt stymied. More and more, as he grew older, Ben liked to take chances, especially when there was no one to hold him back.

As he addressed the envelope and sealed it with a bit of wax from the candle he kept on his desk, he gave it pride of place on his desk. The next day, he would ride into town under the guise of picking up supplies to see it mailed.

Ben wanted to keep a cool head about it all, but he knew that would be nearly impossible. It surprised him how desperately he wanted to receive her letter in return agreeing to marry him.

With any luck, he could have a bride by his side within a month.

After a long day at the factory, Sadie headed home on her own.

Somehow, her mother's hours were even longer, and as sorry as she felt for her mother, Sadie couldn't help relishing the few hours she had to herself.

She quickly washed and dressed in a simple gown and pulled her hair back into a tidy braid. Looking in the mirror, she saw a tired young girl beginning to look older than her years, and it saddened her.

Sadie was sure that if she wasn't careful, she would be the spitting image of her mother, living the same life as her even though she'd tried so hard to avoid it happening.

There weren't too many places to go in the town, and all Sadie wanted was to be around other people.

She hadn't seen the ladies working their quilts since the day they had arrived, and Sadie figured that was because those ladies had leisure time during the day to spend on such things—a luxury neither she nor her mother had.

There was a tiny tea house that opened in the afternoons that Sadie wanted to visit, but it wasn't open on Sundays—her only day off—and it closed before she ever finished work.

She tried not to dwell on her luck, and she wondered if maybe one day she'd be married and able to live a life like the quilting ladies, taking a little time here and there to make something for her home, or

spend time with other women in the community.

The only place Sadie could go after work was the saloon. It wasn't an unsavory place like so many establishments she read about in the West.

Instead, it was more like a restaurant where one could choose to drink if they so pleased. And it wasn't odd to see people there on their own, even women.

Sadie figured it was because the town was full of women working at the factory, and just like her, not every young woman wanted to stay cooped up in her home.

Sadie was seen to a small table by one of the women dressed in an opulent, southern-style dress. The saloon felt a bit like somewhere she had visited near Charleston with her mother—an upscale saloon, with piano players and singers and tasty food.

Sadie knew she couldn't expect a bunch of oysters and clams like the saloon down south, but she just wanted something warm to eat and a little company.

The problem was that as she looked around, there wasn't a single person she recognized. Not even a young woman from her section at the factory.

Instead, the place was dotted with men in fine suits and women in dresses much nicer than hers, and they carried on as if they all knew one another.

Sadie felt utterly alone. She was surrounded by people—which was what she had so desperately wanted—but she was still all alone.

Suddenly, Sadie felt her mood sink and her heart harden. This wasn't how she wanted to end her day; she just wanted to speak to one friendly person.

The feeling reminded her of that dreadful day her mother had ripped her away from her friends in Pennsylvania. That was the only time she'd had real friends.

Bertha and the girls had expected to see her every day, and if they didn't, they came looking for her. And vice versa. Sadie missed that comforting feeling more than anything.

She just wanted to be known. She wanted someone to know her name and a little something about her. *Is it so much to ask?*

Despite her sadness, Sadie stayed to eat a slice of pie and have a little glass of sherry. She smiled as well as she could at the waitress who looked after her, and the few words they spoke to one another were the only social interaction she would have while out.

Sadie tried to tell herself that it was enough, and that maybe if she kept coming back things might change, but she knew hanging out at a saloon regularly as a single woman would be terrible for her reputation.

Defeated, Sadie made her way back to the three-room house she was sharing with her mother. There, she saw her mother sitting by candlelight, drinking tea.

She wasn't reading anything, but just staring ahead. Sadie figured she must have been deep in thought, no doubt planning her next adventure in some distant town.

She made her way inside and went to the room with her bed, changing into her clothes for the night.

"Sadie, that you?" her mother called abruptly.

Well, who else would it be? she snickered before catching herself. She didn't like getting an attitude with her mother, even though at times she found it impossible.

“Yes, Ma. Just changing for the evening.”

“Letter for ya,” her mother called back.

Sadie pulled her head through her nightgown with a start as her eyes went wide. There was only one person the letter was likely to be from, but she had no idea how the letter made its way to the house directly.

She had been receiving all her mail at the general store, so her mother would be none the wiser.

Trying to stay cool, she greeted her mother in the kitchen and took the letter with disinterest. Luckily, her mother seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts, so Sadie could slink back to her room to read the letter in privacy.

She closed the door until it was just ajar, not wanting to attract more attention if her mother heard the door shut.

As Sadie read the letter, her heart began to pound. This letter was a little different from the others, and she could tell Ben hadn't been precious about writing it.

It seemed he may have been eager and excited.

Suddenly, she froze. The end of the letter had her dazed.

If you agree to marry me, please send your response quickly and I will arrange for you to join me in California.

Your tickets will be paid as well as a little bit of money to help you on your way. I wouldn't like for you to touch your hard-earned savings just to get out here.

So, my Sadie, what do you say?

Sincerely yours,

Sadie wanted to shriek in happiness, but she knew she couldn't. Instead, she gripped the letter tightly and read it over five times, making sure to memorize each word.

She was finally going to have a life of her own—a family, a husband, a life on a ranch and a brand-new community to call her own.

Sadie could feel joy rolling through every part of her body and tears of happiness welling in her eyes. Finally, she felt like what was supposed to happen was happening.

The only problem was her mother, who was still sitting quietly in the kitchen, sipping tea, with no idea what Sadie was about to tell her.

Sadie knew it had to be this way; if she had told her mother she had written to a man about a possible marriage, there would've been no telling what she would've done.

Her mother was a tough woman with a strong head, and Sadie might not have been holding that very letter in her hand if she had been honest.

Summoning her courage, Sadie stood, wiped her tears, and clapped her cheeks lightly. She didn't want to appear overtaken with emotion because it would just give her mother more fodder for the impending argument.

She had to be matter-of-fact about the development and remain decisive. The decision had already been made; it was now just a matter of whether her mother would support her.

In the kitchen, Vera sat with her cup of tea refilled. The steam from the cup was making vapors in the air that looked appetizing.

Sadie went to the stove and began to re-boil the water, hoping it wouldn't take too long.

“Shoulda said you wanted some. Woulda poured you a cup.”

“I don’t mind, Ma.”

Sadie waited for the water to boil and then made her tea before sitting down opposite her mother. She knew she was acting a bit odd, but it couldn’t be helped.

What she was about to tell her wouldn’t be taken well.

“Ma,” she started.

“What is it, Sadie? Did you eat dinner already? If not, there’s some meat in the ice box you can help yourself to.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Sadie said. She wasn’t usually this obedient when her mother made suggestions. Ordinarily, she merely smiled or “mmm’d” at her in response.

“Ma, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Well, out with it, then. It’s nearly time to turn in.”

Her mother was always so abrupt, Sadie wasn’t sure if it made things easier or harder.

“I’ve received a proposal.” Sadie bit her lip as she waited for a response.

A glow Sadie hadn’t expected came over her mother’s face. It was like she had suddenly defrosted.

“A proposal? My word. I knew a man in one of these towns would make his intentions known toward you. You’re a pretty girl, Sadie, and a hearty girl despite your small size.

“You’d make any man a wonderful wife,” she said confidently.

Sadie was shocked to hear her mother's warm response. She had been expecting yelling or disapproval almost instantly.

Perhaps she had misjudged her mother, and Sadie almost felt guilty for assuming the worst.

"Ma, I don't know what to say."

"Every girl dreams of getting married. I sure did. Well, marriage wasn't in the cards, given that your father passed before you were even born, but we sure did try.

"Now, just because you get married in this town, it doesn't mean you have to stay here forever. I'm going to be moving on come the winter, and maybe you and your husband will find a better opportunity with me."

Sadie just blinked in stunned silence. Not only did her mother think she was marrying a local man, but she also thought they would want to keep up this nomadic lifestyle.

She was flabbergasted.

"It isn't like that, Ma," she started, knowing she was about to burst her mother's bubble.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"I answered a mail-order bride advertisement. The man I'm marrying is Ben Fields of Sierra Hills, California. He's a rancher and farmer, and he wants to marry me."

Sadie could see her mother's demeanor change from proud to disapproving and angry rather quickly.

"This is nonsense. You're not traveling to California to meet and marry some stranger."

“Ma, it is what I’m going to do. Ben and I have sent each other many letters, and I feel I know him well enough to make this decision. He’s a good man.”

“I never saw you getting any letters until today.”

Sadie felt a pang of guilt at the deception, but she knew in her heart it was the right choice.

“My letters were sent to the general store.”

Her mother stood for a minute as though she understood why Sadie had acted the way she had. Sadie just hoped her perspective would change.

How different was it to marry a man in California from one in the town where they were? Both places were new to her, as far as she was concerned.

“I’m finally going to have the life I’ve always wanted. I’ll have a family of my own in a place I plan to stay the rest of my life.

“I can make friends, build up acquaintances—be a part of a community. By staying in one place, I’ll be able to grow and have a beautiful life.”

Vera folded her arms and looked at the kitchen floor. Sadie hoped she was considering her words carefully, along with her wishes.

“If you want to travel across the land to marry a man you’ve never met before, I can’t stop you, Sadie. But you won’t receive my blessing for this.

“This is a foolhardy risk, and I’ve worked tirelessly to minimize anything bad befalling us. Your life is yours, but I won’t have anything to do with it.”

The words pierced Sadie’s heart. Her mother was so cold as she left

the room and brusquely shut her bedroom door behind her.

Sadie didn't know how long it would be until she left for California, but she hoped that before she did, something would change with her mother.

It hurt to see her like this—closing herself off from Sadie just because Sadie was finally trying to make herself happy.

Sadie didn't want to leave on bad terms, but nothing would stop her from going to California once all the arrangements were made. She was so close to getting exactly what she had wanted her entire life, and she couldn't let her mother stand in her way.

Sadie didn't hate her for making her young life what it was, but she had to do whatever she could to ensure the rest of her life was happy and what she wanted it to be.

Sadie owed herself that much, regardless of whether it meant the end of her relationship with her mother.

It was mid-October when Ben heard a knock at the door and opened it to find Leonard smiling broadly.

He hadn't ridden into town for a few days due to the amount of work on the ranch, but he had been consistent before to check for any letters to save anyone needing to ride out to the ranch. But there Leonard stood, beaming, and Ben felt a little guilty.

"Letter for ya, son," Leonard said. He handed him a pristine ivory envelope Ben knew immediately to be Sadie's.

"Thanks for coming all the way out here for that. I was trying to give you a break this last little while."

"It's no bother at all, and besides, you been writing for quite a while now. Thought you might be waiting on this one."

Leonard winked before asking Ben to give his best to Harriet and Eli, then took his leave. Ben made sure he mounted his horse safely and was on his way before shutting the door and scurrying back to his room to read the letter.

Leonard's sense was certainly accurate as Ben could only wonder if a response to his proposal could only mean an acceptance. Just in case he was wrong, he opened the letter and swiftly read it instead, hunting for the words he longed to see.

I would be delighted to be your bride, Ben Fields.

The words were so exhilarating Ben spoke them aloud to himself. His smile was so wide he thought he might never lose it.

Sadie had agreed to be his wife, and before long, once all the arrangements were put in place, she would be on her way to spend the rest of her life with him.

Ben was sincerely happy for once, and the moment was not lost on him.

He felt grateful, and he felt as though following his impulse had paid off. He had a chance at a joyful life, and he was going to grab it by the horns.

Wanting to share his thrill, Ben thought of his parents immediately. He bolted up from his desk and headed toward the kitchen, where he heard voices.

It would be a great surprise because he was certain he hadn't so much as mentioned marriage before, so Ben couldn't wait to share the news, hoping they'd be overjoyed their lives were about to change for the better.

Yet, when Ben got closer, he could hear only the familiar raised voices he had become so accustomed to. His parents were fighting once again, and Ben didn't have to guess what it was about—he knew it would be the Larabees and whatever they had done this time.

The feud was becoming exhausting to Ben.

"Well, the darn fence sure didn't get like that on its own, now did it, Harriet?" Eli's voice was mean with anger.

"Don't be talking at me like that just because you're mad at those Larabees. I'm your wife, remember?"

He heard his mother slam a cupboard door and the crash of some tin cups knocking around.

“I’m mad as all get out. They think they can traipse around our property like it’s their own and do as they please, well, I’ll show them what’s what.”

“You’re just full of empty threats.”

“Now, listen here—”

Ben interrupted his father before he could go any further. He was tired of them using each other as targets for their frustration and anger.

“What’s happened?”

“Them darned Larabees came and ruined one of our fences. No idea when they did it but I just discovered it. We’ll need to redo several yards of it.”

“I’ll fix it,” was all Ben said. This was how he had been combating the Larabee problem for the last few weeks.

He was trying to be their savior, to step in like Peter would have to fix what was wrong, but the cycle was already leaving Ben exasperated.

And now he didn’t even dare share his good news. He just left the house determined to fix the fence and not look reluctant over it.

Ben hopped on the first horse he saw hitched to the side of the house and headed out toward the far fencing. It was a wooden fence that separated their properties until it reached the river that flowed across both their lands.

He didn’t know exactly where the damaged portion was, but he didn’t care. He was angry now, too, but angry because his perfect moment had been ruined by the same old problems he’d always faced.

As he trotted along the fence, he quickly spotted the problem.

About three posts worth of fence were strewn across the Fields side of

the property. It looked as though someone from the Larabee side had kicked it down until it was busted.

Ben dismounted and hitched the horse to an intact portion of the fence. As he moved closer to the wreckage, he noticed cigar butts and used-up tobacco strewn all over the ground.

Whoever had wrecked the fence had spent some time doing it, and it seemed they had enjoyed themselves, too. All the filth littered about irked Ben to no end, and he couldn't help kicking at the dirt in irritation.

Once again, he was cleaning up someone else's mess—a mess made just to ruin his and his parents' days. Ben was fed up with the rivalry and all the bizarre, time-wasting behavior.

He couldn't understand why the Larabees would even want to ruin the fence that separated their properties. It was in their best interest to keep the fence up in the first place as it kept any wandering livestock on either side from straying too far.

Ben just shook his head. He could never understand the Larabees and their ways.

Half the things they did seemed like more trouble than they were worth, and it made Ben think they must have just enjoyed causing harm to the Fieldses.

And Ben couldn't respect anyone who operated that way. It made him sneer thinking about Patrick Larabee doing something like this and laughing to himself or deriving some sick pleasure out of it all.

As he started to pick up all the damaged portions of the fence, Ben couldn't help but think about Sadie. She would be joining him on the ranch and joining this... whatever it was.

He had promised her a family to care for and take pride in. Was this mess something anyone could take pride in?

Ben sighed as he started piling the broken wood on the back of the horse. He would need to load it up and then walk the horse back before returning with new wood to rebuild the fence.

It would take him all afternoon, and that would mean that the crops he needed to check on wouldn't get seen before sundown. Every day, things were getting more difficult.

It seemed all his family did was react to whatever damage the Larabees had done, fighting amongst themselves about it. Ben could barely remember a day that didn't pass without some sort of conflict between his parents.

He wasn't sure how Sadie would feel about the tension in the household, especially since he'd talked so much about his love for his family.

But if she truly wanted to make family her priority, Ben figured she would take the bad with the good. He just hoped the latter would outweigh the former.

Ben was trying to feel happy again about Sadie accepting his proposal, but it wasn't easy. And the more he thought about the tense situation with the feud, the more he realized how difficult her first days on the ranch were going to be.

Catching up on all the work and acclimatizing to the situation weren't going to be easy, but Ben was trying not to feel downtrodden once again. He always did this.

Whenever something great happened, his mind slipped away from it to focus on all the problems. He could never just enjoy something.

Before long, Ben found himself wishing for Peter. If only he was still there to fix the daily problems and mediate their parents' bickering.

If only he had thought to write away for a bride when Peter was still with them, maybe he could have shared in his joyous news and

genuinely been happy for him—and shown their parents it was okay to be happy, too.

But all the thoughts did was bring a cloud over Ben as he walked the horse back to the barn. Yes, Peter could solve all his problems, but Peter was gone.

All Ben could do was try his best to be like him, even though he knew in his heart he wasn't good enough.

The train heaved along through the desert as Sadie sat in her reclining chair. Ben Fields had insisted on having her travel just a little more comfortably than coach class, and even though Sadie wanted to protest, there wasn't much she could do.

He had arranged everything for her, and as the journey stretched into days, she became more and more grateful. She had been able to sleep off and on and found the chair comfortable and spacious.

It was hard to feel like she deserved it, but she was trying to lose the mindset her mother had ingrained in her. Life would be different now.

Seeing as it was finally the last day of her train journey, Sadie had changed into the dress she purchased before leaving New York.

It had taken a dent out of her personal savings; she wanted to use her own money to buy something for her new life, and a splendid dress that complemented her figure seemed fitting.

Making a good impression with Ben and his parents was her top priority, and dressing the part was necessary.

Sadie wasn't too sure what Ben had told his parents about her. Her life had been unusual for a young woman; she had seen so much of the East coast she was sure that if she were to be honest with people in her new home, they might judge her for being so itinerant.

And she didn't want to be judged. Her mother had worked hard to

give them the best life she could, even if Sadie didn't agree with her choices.

Nothing untoward had gone on, and her mother had raised her respectably. Sadie just hoped that her true nature would shine through as she wore the delicate, cream-colored dress.

The dress was probably a bit too fancy, but she thought it would make the best first impression. It wasn't made of silk or anything extravagant, but its fine, pleated skirt made her feel like a woman who had worked hard to have something so beautiful, which was the truth.

And she had no problem being honest and telling folk that she purchased the dress herself. She was proud of it.

She'd rather be overdressed to meet Ben and his parents than underdressed. And she didn't want to look frumpy in something old and worn.

Sadie took a deep breath, calming herself as she thought it all through. She was about to meet her new family—a family that was hers, for the first time in her entire life.

There was an entire ranch homestead that she could call home that had existed for quite some time and that, if everything went well, she would help take care of for years to come.

The idea of it all excited her, just as it did when she used to dream of such a day as a young girl, never actually thinking it would come. Yet, the day *had* come.

She almost felt nervous as the train rolled closer to Cottonwood Springs. Ben hadn't told her a whole lot about the town, and she hadn't asked, but a town that had a train station must've been a well-to-do community.

Sadie imagined lots of shops and townspeople filling the streets daily.

It had to be different from out east; she knew that from all she had read in papers and books, but she still imagined it to be a dynamic place.

Ben seemed to have so many ambitions for the family's ranch, and she was sure that a town serviced by a train would be the perfect place to realize those dreams.

Sadie hoped Ben would see how she shared his vision. Of course, she knew he must because he had arranged for her to come all this way, but meeting him in person would be the real test.

Hopefully, he could see what a hard worker she was, and how committed to his family she would be, even if it took time to get to know them and all their quirks.

While Sadie was growing up, there had only been one person's quirks looming large in her life. The idea that she could get to know more people and have them welcome her into their private lives was all she had ever longed for.

She wanted to hear his parents' stories, to learn to keep their house, and to tend to their gardens and crops. It all felt like such a privilege, though she was sure most would have seen it as routine or even an obligation.

Soon, the train began to slow its pace and Sadie could see ranches and fields of cattle or crops passing by every few minutes. The sights were astounding to her.

Far into the distance, some mountain peaks rose above the semi-desertscape. She had been awed by the deserts she'd passed in other territories, but this was the perfect mix.

California was breathtaking, and it was about to become her home.

Her giddiness resumed, covering her nervousness, and she stuck her face as close to the window as she could without being impolite.

One of those vast ranches, with its big homestead and clusters of animals, would be her new home. She would be sleeping in her own bed and waking to a house that she could call home.

In the morning, she could walk out onto the property and look at the sweeping landscapes surrounding her—this beautiful place was about to become the place where she belonged.

Sadie couldn't have felt happier. She was beaming as they announced the next stop, which was hers. It was time to meet her future.

As the train gradually pulled into the station, Sadie scrambled from her seat to locate her trunks. A kindly porter saw her and assured her that her trunks would be brought to the platform, and that she should wait by the train for them.

She wasn't used to this life; she thought she needed to fend for herself. But, once again, Sadie took a deep breath and reminded herself everything was going to be different from now on—and she deserved it.

Sadie sat back down for a minute, waiting for the train to come to a full stop. It may not have been ladylike to wait in the aisle; it was only men who stood, acting impatient.

As she waited, she spotted a tall, broad-shouldered gentleman with auburn hair blazing in the afternoon sun. It was Ben; she knew that much from how he had described himself.

After a minute, she realized she was holding her breath and the train had finally stopped in the station completely. She rose slowly, her eyes still fixed on Ben.

Sadie was sure he couldn't see her; he was a little way up the platform and craning his neck in all directions as people started to filter out of the train.

But Sadie was blushing. Ben was handsome, much more so than she

had anticipated. He was tall and muscular and thus quite different from the men she had met out east.

She figured he must spend so much time working hard on the ranch that it made him broad and buff. Sadie blushed even harder at her own thoughts.

She had come all this way to find a home and a husband and family to make a meaningful commitment to, but she hadn't bargained on a man so attractive.

Luck had never been in her favor, but suddenly it seemed like it was. Perhaps she was about to start the perfect life she had never thought possible.

Ben was anxious as he stood on the platform, eyeing everyone exiting the train. He hated that he had come empty handed, but he knew he'd need to help Sadie with her trunks, so he didn't think it would be practical to come with a splashy bouquet.

Now that he saw another man with a handful of flowers, he regretted his decision. The bouquet was at home, waiting to welcome her—he just had to hope she wouldn't be offended by his choice.

The train station had only been built nine years ago. Ben could still remember well when visitors and new settlers had to arrive in town by stagecoach. Yet the train had changed things.

It had allowed new businesses to open and for more people to settle in the town center, even though to him the town still felt quaint and small. He hoped Sadie would like Cottonwood Springs as much as he did.

Ben watched as a woman in a fine dress was helped off the train by a porter a way down the platform. The dress was easily the finest of any lady on the platform, and the woman's hair was perfectly pulled back despite the travel.

It took Ben a minute to realize that this beautiful woman was the very Sadie he was waiting to meet—it was her nervousness as she stood idly on the platform that gave her away.

She was a breathtaking sight to him as the porter returned with two

modest, worn trunks that didn't quite match the finery of her dress.

Ben smiled to himself, knowing that she must have worked hard to make a good impression. He stepped toward her with a broad smile.

"Howdy there. I'm Ben Fields."

It was then that their eyes finally found each other's gaze. Sadie smiled, and as he finally came close to her, she threw her arms around him and captured him in a hug.

"It's me, Sadie, and it's ever so nice to meet you in person. My goodness!"

Ben was caught off-guard by her familiarity for a minute, but the warmth and force of her hug felt too genuine to be uncomfortable. She was full of energy and enthusiasm for him, and he couldn't help but feel flattered and a little sheepish.

"Well, it's mighty fine to meet you, too."

"My trunks are here," she said, motioning to the two beside her. "Maybe we could each manage one?"

Ben smirked. He hadn't expected a woman in a dress like that to offer to handle her own trunk, but then again, Sadie Jackson wasn't like other ladies.

He had gleaned that from her letters, but it was also becoming increasingly apparent with every passing minute.

"Well, alright. If you're sure you can handle it."

He grabbed one of the trunks, surprised it wasn't heavier. Sadie did the same, and the two walked toward the horses he brought to the station.

"How far is the home from here?" she asked.

“Oh, just a short ride. Maybe twenty minutes at the pace of a trot.”

“A trot,” he heard her mutter.

As they stopped in front of two tall horses, there was a funny look on Sadie’s face.

“Thought it’d be nice if we rode back together, seeing as the weather is so nice. You’re not cold, are you?”

Sadie wore a matching cream overcoat that was well suited for the fall chill.

“Not in the least. It’s just, well, I’ve never ridden a horse.”

He could see she was trying and failing to pet the animal as it neighed in her face. It seemed his exuberant wife-to-be was less than comfortable around horses, and that could prove a problem.

Ben helped Sadie onto her horse and secured a trunk on each to spread the weight and not overload a single mount. After he settled in his own saddle, he briefly explained how to use the reins and stirrups.

Sadie was nodding along, but he wasn’t really sure if she was getting it. There was a vague sinking feeling in his chest Ben desperately wanted to ignore, but he couldn’t.

He had wanted a wife who could get right into working on the home and ranch, and he’d never even thought about asking how she was with horses or livestock or other things native to a ranch. Ben had just seen her enthusiasm and thought it would be enough.

Ranching could be plenty hard, and he wasn’t sure if Sadie understood that. It wouldn’t be like the job she’d held before coming out here, and the hours were sure to be much longer.

In truth, it was nonstop most days. And then there were the Larabees.

Ben hadn't mentioned a thing about them to Sadie out of fear it would scare her off. He felt a little guilty about that, but he knew it had to be done.

He wanted a future that didn't factor them in, anyway, and even if that was fanciful thinking, he didn't care. His life had been defined by them in so many ways that Ben knew now was going to be a time for change.

If things worked out with Sadie, he wanted to grow the business so that no matter what sneaky scheme they enacted, it wouldn't matter. He hoped Sadie was as resilient as she seemed.

They began slowly riding away from the station and the town. Ben kept checking on Sadie out of worry, but soon he noticed the smile on her face.

She looked delighted as she held the reins up correctly, steering the horse even with a few jitters here and there. The longer they rode down the trail, the more confident she seemed, and it put Ben's mind at ease, at least for the time being.

He should have known she wasn't the type to shrink away from a challenge.

"Oh, my goodness, this little old horse is walking like I'm not even on it!"

Ben chuckled at her attitude. She seemed overjoyed to be riding a horse for the first time.

"Just wait 'till you take him out for a run when you're a bit more experienced. You'll be surprised."

"Could he run now? Or would me and the trunk just fall onto the ground?"

For a minute, Ben couldn't tell if she was really asking because she

wanted to try or if she was joking. But then her face cracked into a laugh, and Ben caught on.

“Best you don’t try,” he said with a smirk.

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t know how to make it go any faster. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I’m loving every second of it.”

Sadie laughed again and made a funny face, and Ben felt even more at ease. Something about her was a tad familiar, and it took him a minute to put his finger on it.

But when he did, it warmed his heart.

She had that same wide-eyed optimism and fearlessness that Peter had had. And that undaunting cheerfulness.

It was incredible to see it again, and to think he’d get to see it every day with Sadie. He’d missed it, and Ben couldn’t help thinking it was perfect—*she* was perfect.

“Thank you for meeting me at the platform,” she said.

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“I just can’t believe I’m here. It seemed like I’d never make it, at times.”

“Was the train journey hard?” Ben had never ridden by train, and he imagined coming all the way from New York couldn’t have been easy.

“It wasn’t. After a few days, I was just dying to wash and have a conversation with someone that wasn’t just boring pleasantries. My goodness, that must sound awful. I’m sorry.”

Ben laughed. Sadie certainly didn’t put on airs. “I think that’s very honest.”

“You were so kind to furnish me with a comfortable seat. I can’t say I know what it’s like to travel in any other class, but it was comfortable. And I even slept some.

“But the people around me seemed to change every day. It was dizzying. As soon as I thought I’d reached a comfortable rapport, they’d be gone.”

“Well, at least you won’t be needing to get on that train again any time soon.” Ben smiled. Sadie just smiled back at him but said nothing.

He wondered what she was thinking about him, and about what she’d seen of the town so far. It must have been a little overwhelming, yet she didn’t let on that it was in the least.

It seemed Sadie was pretty remarkable.

The two rode on, laughing and smiling, until they reached the ranch.

Ben couldn’t believe his luck. He was enchanted that this was the Sadie he had written to, and now she was there on the ranch about to begin this new chapter with him.

As they slowed toward the house, his bright mood was dimmed immediately. The exact thing he hadn’t bargained for, and indeed hadn’t even considered, was playing out.

He could hear them before he saw them clearly.

The Larabees were there, on his parents’ porch, opposite his own mother and father. The couples were in some sort of heated screaming match.

Ben was so disappointed he could have sworn, but he didn’t dare in front of Sadie. Things were already bad enough. He had no idea how he was going to explain this to her.

Everything had been so happy and cheerful, and now the very problem he'd thought they could evade for a least a little while was making itself known right before them.

He wanted to stop them from riding any closer, but it was too late. Sadie had dropped her reins, and the horse naturally stopped as she sat looking perplexed.

Ben felt mortified. He had no idea how to explain what was happening, and he suddenly felt like he could see Sadie getting back on the train just as easily as she had arrived.

All the excited feelings that had Sadie floating on a cloud as they rode up to the ranch suddenly drained out of her. Yards in front of her, two older couples on the ranch house's porch were yelling at one another, and they looked terribly angry.

Sadie wasn't sure she'd ever seen such a thing between people of that age. It was a shocking sight and completely unexpected.

The ride to the ranch had been so peaceful and jovial, and she had felt like she and Ben had connected and even begun something special between them.

"This is too far, Fields! You think you can waltz into our ranch and do as you please just because you got the wrong idea on everything yet again? Well, that's just another thing you're dead wrong about," the older man with a tall cowboy hat yelled.

"I ain't been wrong about much in my entire life, Larabee. You best just watch your words!"

"I got a lifetime of anecdotes that say otherwise."

"Keep your mind on yourself. Maybe things wouldn't go missing if you did."

"What is that, a threat?"

The men looked so heated and tense that Sadie couldn't predict what

was about to happen. Suddenly, the doors of the barn opposite the house slammed open and a younger man stalked out, heading straight for the commotion.

He looked steaming mad, and Sadie just couldn't begin to guess who everyone was, other than Fields and the woman standing beside him, whom she figured to be Ben's parents.

Sadie hadn't expected anything like this. Instead, she thought it was going to be a warm welcome and that she'd be busy showing what a great wife she would make the couple's son.

Now it seemed like there were much more pressing matters than her arrival and any impending wedding.

"Of all the low-down, no good, rotten things I seen in my life... where is it? Where did you hide the lumber? This isn't a joke!" the young man exclaimed.

Sadie watched Ben closely, trying to gauge his reaction to everything. She expected him to be as shocked as she was, or maybe alarmed.

This couldn't have been what he thought would happen when they returned to the ranch.

Yet, Ben didn't look all that surprised to her, which made her wonder whether the tense scene playing out in front of them was something not entirely unusual.

"We don't know anything about no lumber," the elder Fields stated brusquely.

"Like heck you don't," the younger man called back.

"I've had just about enough of your insolence, boy. Nobody here touched anything on the Larabee ranch. We wouldn't touch anything of yours with a ten-foot pole."

“Liar,” was all the younger spat back.

“What d’you say?” Fields asked, looking dangerously irate.

The one who must have been the elder Larabee took a step forward, looking just as hostile. “You watch what you’re saying to my son, ya hear?”

Sadie was beginning to feel a bit unsettled. This wasn’t just a normal argument. The conflict was far too mean and involved for it to be run-of-the-mill, neighborly tension.

She had seen it before, especially in cities where people lived in smaller quarters close to one another. A simple misunderstanding had a way of ballooning into something nasty, but she hadn’t seen anything quite like this.

And Sadie was no stranger to conflict. It wasn’t that she and her mother had fought often, but moving around so much didn’t do much to quell strife.

Still, what she was witnessing wasn’t the overblown stress of moving or starting again or even just a bad mood. This was something else altogether.

“I’m tired of you, Larabee, and you got some nerve coming on to my property making accusations like this when you know well that we ain’t got nothing to do with your timber going missing. That is, if it even went missing or existed in the first place.”

The elder Fields’ eyes were narrowing now as he stepped forward to confront the man. Sadie was sure they were about to come to blows.

She had never seen a real fight; Sadie never strayed into places where such things were common, but she’d heard plenty of stories about the West. As the sordid tales flashed in her mind, she was suddenly hoping no one was carrying a revolver, or worse.

“I’m no liar,” the senior Larbaee said.

“Well, neither am I,” Fields retorted.

The men were nose to nose. Sadie’s nerves were piquing when suddenly Ben sprang off his horse and ran in between the two men.

He separated them with his hands and then kept pushing his father backward to create as much space as possible.

Worried but not wanting to be forgotten, Sadie did her best to dismount her horse for the very first time. She didn’t know how to go about it at all, let alone in a ladylike way.

Sadie held onto the saddle as best she could and let herself slowly slip off as she faced the horse’s tummy. She did it with relative ease and felt accomplished for a minute before retraining her eyes on Ben.

“Stay back, Pa. There’s no telling what the Larabees’ll do if we take this too far.”

Fields didn’t seem too happy with Ben’s interruption. Sadie hoped the argument wouldn’t spread between Ben and his father today, of all days.

But as she watched, Sadie was pleased to see he was obliging his son.

“The marshal will be coming to round you Fieldses up. Just you wait,” the younger Larabee called as he stood by his father’s side.

It seemed Ben didn’t like that threat, and he spun around with rage in his eyes. “You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Jailing innocents so you could see our ranch ruined.”

It looked like Ben could spit in his face, and Sadie didn’t like seeing him so angry. She needed to do something to interrupt everyone and change the energy of the entire situation.

From everything she'd heard, it all had to be a terrible misunderstanding. Surely, if everyone calmed down and talked it out, they could see the truth.

Sadie was never one to stand idly by during difficult times. One of the side effects of her mother's lifestyle was that Sadie wasn't very reserved.

If she had something to say, she would say it. It was the only way to get what you needed when you were continually starting over with brand new people.

So, with an idea in her head, Sadie bucked up her courage and walked over to the warring families. Before Ben could throw something back in the Larabees' faces, she cut him off.

"I'm Sadie Jackson. Hi all," she said in a cheerful voice. "How do you do?" She put her hand out and shook the Fieldses' hands, then did the same to each of the three Larabees.

Everyone was so shocked they stood silent staring at her, even Ben.

"I've arrived to be Ben's bride. It's sure a pleasure to meet all of you."

Ben's mother's eyes went wide as she looked Sadie over.

Sadie figured she hadn't even noticed their arrival. She didn't want her or Ben's father to feel embarrassed by whatever was going on, but she did hope she could put a stop to it.

The Fieldses looked at one another and it seemed they were exchanging their thoughts wordlessly. Then, Ben's mother flushed and walked to Sadie with a warm smile, clasping both her hands.

"Sadie, it's a delight to finally meet you. You must be exhausted from your travels, but you look marvelous. If I hadn't known, I would never have guessed you traveled across the country."

The genuineness with which she was greeted eased Sadie. It seemed she might finally receive the warm welcome she had dreamed of. Sadie just hoped she could keep their focus.

Ben's father moved to his wife's side and smiled fondly at her.

"Are you hungry, dear? Harriet here will fix you up a big dinner, build you back up after such long travel. I'm Eli Fields."

She shook his hand again happily and looked on at her parents-in-law-to-be. Despite the scene, they seemed entirely pleased at her arrival.

"Ben, why didn't you mention what a fine woman Sadie was? I would have prepared better for her."

Sadie blushed at the words, never having received such a compliment in her life. She knew it was the dress, and the confidence her exhilaration at finally arriving was extending her, but she loved it, nonetheless.

And she knew Ben's parents would understand the façade once they got to know her.

"Oh, not at all," Sadie said, still clasping Harriet's hands. "I'm so pleased to be here and to finally be meeting you all. Ben has spoken so highly of you."

Sadie knew she was beaming, and she didn't care.

There was no one there to tell her to simmer down and get her head on straight. No one to tell her all her ideas weren't practical or possible, and she was going to relish every moment.

The interruption served its purpose, and Sadie was happy to see the Larabees look on uneasily and then leave in huff, muttering about returning to their own property.

She gathered they must be from a neighboring ranch. Her gut told her

this wouldn't be the last time she heard of this conflict, nor the Larabees, but it didn't matter.

She'd cleared them off as she had wished to, so that the most important parts of the day could receive attention.

As she stood greeting his parents, Ben looked on with shock. It amused Sadie, and when she finally caught his eyes, she gave him the warmest smile she could muster.

She hoped he didn't mind her interrupting and stopping the conflict, even if it was only put on hold temporarily.

It was difficult to read his eyes, but as his parents smiled at her and began to walk her to the house, Sadie hoped she hadn't just caused a problem already.

“Sadie, my dear,” Harriet said. “Come now, let’s get you ready for the ceremony.”

The words made Sadie blush, and she followed Harriet Fields dutifully up to a bedroom with a modest vanity and a plush but plain bed with white pillows and quilts.

Sadie wondered if this would be her room for the time being, but she didn’t want to think about it too much. It was larger than any bedroom she’d ever had and miles more beautiful, but Sadie hadn’t really thought the day through.

If she was marrying later that afternoon, surely she would be spending the evening with her husband? It almost seemed too good to be true.

“Did my son tell you the wedding would be happening immediately?” Harriet asked.

Once the door was shut, Sadie sat down at the vanity.

“He said it would be arranged with haste, so I did expect it wouldn’t be long if everything was as planned. But I admit I didn’t think it would be this quick.”

“Ah, not to worry, my dear. It’s best to just get these big things out of the way so you can get on with the details of life. Would you like to take some time to wash and change?”

“Your dress is beautiful, so I understand if you’d like to wear that,” Harriet added.

Sadie had let herself think only a little about a wedding dress. When she was young, she was sure it was something she and her mother would look for together, either finding one from an acquaintance or, if she was lucky, ordering one from a shop.

The fine cream dress she wore could easily double for the wedding, and Sadie would’ve been happy with that, but she could sense Harriet Fields was about to suggest otherwise.

“I don’t want to be too forward, seeing as we just met, but if you like, you can wear my wedding gown. I’m sure it’s not too fashionable anymore, but my mother sewed the lace inlays herself.”

Harriet turned to take a dress hanging from a mirror Sadie hadn’t noticed. She brought it over and showed it to Sadie with care.

It had a very high neck and delicate lace inlays in the sleeves and skirt. It was beautiful, and not just because of how it was crafted but because it was a part of the Fields family.

Sadie couldn’t have imagined that Ben’s mother would offer her such a privilege.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said. “Will it fit?”

“Dear, you’re a little smaller than I was when I wed Eli, but we’ll make it fit. Not to worry.”

“I’d be honored to wear it,” Sadie added. She almost felt like she could cry, but she didn’t want to. She just wanted to savor the day, even if it was off to an uneven start.

After Harriet replaced the dress on the mirror and explained where Sadie could wash, she suggested she would give her some privacy and return to help her dress.

But Sadie couldn't let her leave without asking a question first.

"Who were those people on the porch?" She hoped Harriet would give her an honest answer, though she may have expected her to avoid the subject altogether.

"Oh, those were them darned Larabees. Those are our neighbors—closest neighbors, one ranch over, too. I'm sorry you had to see that, especially when you first arrived.

"I'm sure Ben has told you all about our horrible neighbors. Just would've been nice if you could've been spared for a day or two. They've got no sense, those people."

"They seemed pretty angry," Sadie added, hoping to keep her talking. Ben hadn't mentioned anything about conflict with the neighbors, nor anyone named Larabee.

"This feud's been going on for so long, I'm too used to their ways and their vengeful behaviors," Harriet confessed.

"Must've been a little shocking hearing about them and then seeing them having one of their tantrums, accusing us of all manner of things." She shook her head, like she wanted to forget it for the time being.

Sadie just didn't have the heart to tell Harriet Fields that she knew nothing of what she was talking about. And she wasn't sure if that was because she thought it might make Ben look poor or if it was to save her own embarrassment in the situation.

Either way, she didn't want Harriet worrying or upset that she had only learned about the Larabees after witnessing the argument.

"Oh, would you excuse me for a moment? There was something I forgot to mention to Ben that I'm eager to say before the ceremony."

It was a poor excuse, but with any luck, Harriet wouldn't suspect

anything.

“Of course, my dear. I’m sure there are many things you two have to say to one another. Just keep it quick.

“You’ll have all the time in the world to whisper sweet nothings after the ceremony.” Harriet winked at her, and Sadie blushed.

She scooted into the hallway and went partway down the stairs until she could see Ben. He was sitting in the parlor looking a bit nervous and idle, no doubt anticipating the ceremony.

Catching his attention, she whispered to him and motioned for him to meet her on the stairs.

Ben looked a little spooked as he met her, which irked her. If anyone should have been spooked, it was her.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the situation with the Larabees?”

He went a little white, like he hadn’t expected her to ask, but that didn’t stop Sadie from pressing on.

“How could you speak so highly of the family and the ranch and leave out some sort of long-standing feud?” As the words came out, Sadie found herself getting a bit more upset.

This wasn’t how she had imagined the day going.

“Sadie, I don’t know what to say.”

“When did this start? It’s kind of important information, you know. Is it like this every day?” She was trying to keep her voice to a whisper, but it was hard.

Ben sighed and rubbed his forehead, looking terribly pained.

He looked around the room then grabbed her hand, leading them to

the back of the house where it seemed no one would be able to overhear them talk.

“Well? Tell me,” Sadie insisted, her arms folded across her chest.

“It was a long time ago, and it was all over land. I can barely remember a time when my parents weren’t fighting with the Larabees.

“My parents own all this land that stretches down to the river that cuts across both our properties. It’s a lot of land, and I’m not sure exactly what happened, but the Larabees tried to take the land closest to the river.

“Ever since then, our families have despised one another,” he explained. “Look, I’m not proud of it but it’s just the way things are ‘round here.”

Sadie could tell the feud troubled Ben, but she wanted to know more. A feud like that would affect more than just the Fieldses and Larabees.

“What do the townspeople feel about all this? Your community?”

Ben just stood opposite her, struggling to find his words. Sadie was already disappointed.

What had happened to the Ben who was so committed to being family first? Didn’t he care about all the people in his life?

“To be honest, Sadie, people here aren’t that close. I do put my family first, but only my family. You gotta look out for your own out here.”

Sadie was deeply disappointed to hear his perspective. Ben hadn’t struck her as the kind of person who would be this single-minded.

It was frustrating, but she almost wanted to blame herself for not asking the questions before. She would never have imagined the community situation to be so dire, and for Ben’s family to be at the center of the problem.

Sadie was sure that if the community wasn't close, this conflict had something to do with it.

"Why didn't you just tell me?" she asked again.

"Sadie, I'm sorry. But I didn't want to make my family sound awful. You know, maybe you wouldn't be standing here if I had."

Ben looked so sad and embarrassed, yet, as empathetic as Sadie was, she couldn't help feeling lied to. He hadn't been honest with her at all, and now a big part of the dream she had for their marriage felt like it was slipping through her fingers.

Sadie could've chastised herself for dreaming too big and having expectations and trusting a man she hardly knew, but she didn't want to do that.

"Well, things can't stay like this. This community hasn't met me yet, and when they do, things will be changing. We'll be having dinner with different people every night before I'm through—maybe even the Larabees."

Sadie was so confident in her words that Ben looked at her a little astonished. She could have told him she felt used and that she needed time to think things over.

But Sadie wasn't really that kind of person. Moving around so much had made her more outgoing and practical than most.

She wasn't going to make a tough situation more difficult; instead, she was going to focus on the things she could change. And making an impact on the community was one thing she could do.

Sadie had waited her whole life for this opportunity, and she wasn't about to run away just because things were hard. Running was the last thing she planned to do after a lifetime of it.

Ben paced on the front porch. Just looking at it was making him mad, though, because that argument it held earlier was causing his marriage to start on a sour note.

He didn't like the idea that they were going to be wed while Sadie was likely still mad at him, but now it couldn't be helped. He was just lucky she hadn't delayed it or, worse, called it off entirely.

If she had insisted on waiting, he wouldn't have blamed her. Ben had never even considered telling Sadie what was happening with the Larabees in any of his letters.

It wasn't like he had set out to deceive her wickedly; he just didn't think it was something important because, in his mind, the issues with the Larabees were going to be worked out at some point.

He had no idea when or how and it pained him even thinking about it, but he just desperately wanted his life to be about something other than them.

Just once, he wanted things to be about him and his future. And it seemed like his desperation had led him to make a selfish mistake.

His father sat on the porch bench, smoking a pipe, but he wasn't saying too much. Ben wasn't sure if he was still steamed from the run-in with the Larabees earlier or if his mind was elsewhere.

Ben was just happy he had greeted Sadie so well and that he was there

with him now. Marriage was something Peter never had the opportunity to experience, and that wasn't lost on Ben.

He felt lucky, and despite everything, he wanted the day to be special for his entire family.

"Pacing will only wear out your boots, son," Eli said, taking another puff of his pipe.

"Can't help it, Pa," Ben blurted out. He was getting more nervous by the minute.

"Waiting for your bride is one of the toughest moments a young man faces. Just a rite of passage." Eli stood and put a hand on Ben's shoulder. "Proud of you, son. You made a great choice."

Ben's eyes welled with tears. He'd never heard his dad tell him he was proud before.

It was something that always seemed reserved for Peter, and then disappeared altogether after Peter passed. Ben relished his father's attention in that moment as he squeezed his shoulder and smiled.

"And she's not shy around those Larabees. She's going to be able to hold her own, and I like that. A real fighter."

Exasperation in the face of anxiety passed through Ben, and suddenly he just wanted to sit down and maybe even take a quick drink. And he wasn't even a drinking man.

But that moment of disappointment didn't last long because Sadie, followed by his mother, suddenly made her way out to the porch.

Ben was taken aback. She was wearing a different dress, one more delicate and whiter than the other, but he could tell it wasn't something new.

It looked like something he'd seen in a painting. Sadie was stunning.

“Sadie, I...” He wasn’t sure what to say.

“Does she look stunning? My old dress fits her perfectly.” Harriet beamed.

“Looks like a vision,” Eli said, snuffing out his pipe. Ben could see the happy pride returning to his face. He wondered if seeing Sadie in that dress had aroused any old memories.

Imagining his mother wearing it was difficult, but his parents had done what he and Sadie were about to do so long ago.

Ben appreciated that Sadie had agreed to wear his mother’s dress, and proud that his mother had asked for her to wear it.

It showed him how much his parents supported his decision to marry Sadie.

The pastor welcomed the two and Ben’s parents to a spot under an apple tree not far from the house and commenced the ceremony. It wasn’t particularly long, but Ben appreciated the kind words the pastor spoke.

He managed to steal a glance at Sadie a few times, and each time she gave him a little smile, sending his heart into flutters. He was happy to see she didn’t seem awfully angry still and was sharing his excitement for the life they were about to start.

Ben felt an undeniable connection between himself and Sadie, and he was eager that this was just the first day of the rest of their lives.

After the ceremony, the Fieldses welcomed the pastor and a select few people from the town for dinner. Ben could tell Sadie was happily surprised that a few townspeople were joining them given the conversation that they had earlier.

Perhaps she would see things weren’t quite as dire as they first appeared, though Ben wasn’t too hopeful. He just wanted her to enjoy

the night and forget about the terrible start to things on the ranch for now.

Pastor Milton, Ike Bigglesworth and his wife Maryon, and the town's tailor, Barry Forsyth, were gathered in the parlor for the occasion.

Ike was a little older than Ben's parents and the wealthiest rancher in town. He was someone Ben had always looked up to, so he was eager to introduce Sadie to him.

"Sadie, this is Ike Bigglesworth. He owns a ranch on the other side of town."

"Pleased to meet you," Sadie said. Ben could tell she was shaking his hand firmly.

"Pleased to meet you, Sadie. I'm honored you had Maryon and me in for the occasion, Ben. Means a lot to us," Ike said, patting Ben's back.

"Happy you could be here," Ben said, smiling from ear to ear. He turned to Sadie. "Ike's ranch is the most outstanding ranch in all of Cottonwood Springs."

"Now, now, flattery will get you everywhere."

Ben chuckled, but he couldn't help himself. Ike was one of his favorite people in town.

"Well, Maryon and I have a little something for you two," Ike said. At that, Maryon came to his side with a large box tied with a pretty yellow ribbon.

"You didn't have to bring us something," Ben said sheepishly.

He felt a little embarrassed at the fuss. He'd never had an occasion such as this where all the attention was on him; as much as he'd wanted it for once, it wasn't easy.

Maryon handed the box to Sadie, and the couple eagerly encouraged her to open it. Ben could tell she was ecstatic to have received a gift, and he happily watched her open the box.

“Oh, my goodness!” she exclaimed. “It’s exquisite.” Sadie held up a fine china cup and saucer. It was hand-painted in a delicate floral pattern.

“Every lady needs to start out with some good china in her cabinet,” Maryon said. Ike was quick to hum in agreement.

“I’ve never been given something so nice,” Sadie said in wonder. Ben could tell she was being completely honest, and it made him like her all the more.

He knew she had been working hard before coming out to California, and he felt she deserved all the wonderful things that might come her way.

“Now, you two just enjoy your day,” Ike said happily as he and Maryon retreated to the couch.

Ben stood next to Sadie and looked into her eyes. She almost looked a little overwhelmed.

“Ike is the kindest man I know,” he said.

“I’m just a little speechless. I’ve never seen fine china like this up close and, well, now it’s mine to take care of.”

Overcome by his feelings, he grabbed Sadie’s hand and clasped it for a minute, sharing a sweet smile. He quickly let it go, not wanting to be untoward, but he was so pleased it was Sadie who had become his bride.

“Ike is a good man. Whenever my family has faced troubles, he’s always been on our side and come to our rescue. Our town wouldn’t be the same without him.”

“So, there is some community spirit here, after all,” Sadie commented with a smirk.

“I guess there is,” Ben had to admit. He had never looked at it that way before.

All the guests sat with the family around the dinner table for a meal cooked by Harriet. Ben felt proud sitting beside Sadie; it was his first dinner as a married man, and he loved the feeling.

His mother had made two different types of meat and many vegetable side dishes, and he could see that Sadie was once again floored by it all. In truth, his mother rarely went to such trouble for dinner, but Ben felt proud she had done so on that day.

“Won’t be long ‘till winter, now, will it?” Ike said as everyone dug into their meals.

“Not long at all,” Eli returned. “Hoping we can catch up on our work before the cold nights set in.”

“I have no doubt you will,” Ike said.

“I’m looking forward to doing as much as I can,” Sadie offered.

Everyone glanced at her with a bit of surprise, but Ben looked on proudly.

“Well, dear, you’ve only just arrived. Tomorrow we’ll get you acquainted with the property,” Harriet said.

“I’m used to working a full day. And coming here has made me so happy, I’d love to help you with whatever chores I can as soon as possible.”

Ike hummed in approval once again, and Ben noticed his father had a relaxed look on his face. He hoped it was a face he would see more of as Sadie acclimatized to the ranch and began working in earnest.

Ben wanted everything to work out well, and with Sadie's extra hands, he believed it would.

After the dinner, Harriet served coffee and a plum cake in the parlor. While Sadie chatted to Maryon and Harriet, Ike pulled Ben aside and out of earshot.

"That's quite the bride you've chosen. You've made a wonderful choice, son," he said. "Marriage is just the thing for a man your age, and with a woman like that, with such personality and grit, you'll make a great team."

Receiving Ike's approval gave Ben a boost. He wanted everyone to see in Sadie what he saw, and hearing that was the case from someone he had so much respect for was wonderful.

"She's even more incredible than I imagined," Ben admitted. He felt a little silly saying it out loud, but it was true, and he trusted Ike with his thoughts.

"As she should be, son. Marriage is one of the most important decisions we make in our lifetime."

"Is it easy, marriage?"

Ike chuckled. "Not in the least. And you should know that already; you have two healthy parents just across the room."

Ben smirked, knowing it was true. He had just hoped to hear something reassuring.

"This is my advice to you. Make her happy, and your happiness will follow. Not much more to it."

Ben thought for a moment. Ike was wise, so Ben knew he would be right, but it couldn't be as simple as that. Perhaps the hard part was just keeping someone you cared for dearly happy.

Ben thought about his parents' marriage and how often they fought. Surely that couldn't be happiness.

He looked at his parents and they didn't look unhappy, but he knew how things went.

Still deep in thought, Ben just smiled as Ike patted his back and then walked off, seemingly looking for a second helping of cake. It was reassuring that Ike had such confidence in his choice despite his puzzling advice.

The only thing unexamined in the back of his mind was Sadie's declaration earlier in the day.

Now that the ceremony and dinner had passed, and he could see how seamlessly she was blending with his family and the friends they had, he wondered about how serious she was about changing the community.

It was clear Sadie wanted to end the rift with the Larabees, and Ben was getting the feeling that his new wife didn't just give up on her goals.

But the feud with the Larabees was so long-standing, Ben found it hard to believe that even with a new face and fresh ideas any resolution could be found. With people like them, who had no morals and just wanted to see others suffer, there was no reasoning.

He hated to think that it would take time for Sadie to realize how evil they were, and he didn't want to see her disappointed and disillusioned. It would break his heart.

After all the guests had left and Ben's parents were intent on retiring to bed, Ben moved to the door to put his overcoat on. Sadie watched, a little puzzled.

"Where are you going at this time of night?" she asked. Ben was starting to love how she always spoke her mind.

"Just thought it was about time we headed home for the first time."

"Home?"

Ben nodded with a smile. Sadie stood and walked to him, still confused.

"I thought this was our home, with your parents?"

Instead of answering, he shook his head and reached for her overcoat, helping her into it. The coat was a perfect weight for the cool desert night, which Ben was pleased about considering the walk wasn't the shortest.

Once she was ready, he took her hand and they headed out into the night.

The air was chilled but not brisk. And it was a fair walk across the property and then along the river to reach their new house.

The house itself was only completed a week previously. Ben had

worked tirelessly on it in the little free time he could scrounge up.

He felt guilty, considering how behind the ranch work was getting, but his parents had insisted the house should be a priority. And he knew they were right.

The building was a little homestead that Peter had started before he became ill, and Ben had then scrambled to transform once he'd begun trading letters with Sadie. It was small and modest, but its walls carried Peter in them, and Ben loved feeling closer to him because of it.

The two walked along the river hand in hand, with Ben carrying a lantern in the other. Sadie kept asking where they were headed, but he wouldn't say a word except asking her to trust him.

"Well, how can I trust you in the night like this?" Sadie teased.

"You have to trust me. We were just married," Ben threw back.

"Oh, is that how it goes? I'm not too sure. There was a lovely room with a perfect-sized vanity back at the house. I think maybe that's where I should lay my head for the time being."

Sadie was grinning and pleased with herself as she continued to tease Ben. He loved her spirit and playfulness, and he would've been lying if he said he didn't find it attractive.

She was fun, and Ben wasn't the most familiar with fun. Playful was something Peter knew about, but Ben never felt like he could let his guard down to be the same.

Peter could get all his work done, and do it exceptionally, and still have a good time. Ben was never so lucky.

But as he looked at Sadie grinning by his side, he wondered if that was about to change.

Soon, they were standing in front of the modest house. The moon shone brightly, and Ben could see the look of wonder on Sadie's face.

"Is this... ours?"

"It's all ours. Our home," Ben confirmed. "Come here."

Wanting to make the most of the moment, Ben lifted her into his arms and started walking up the steps to the front door. Sadie was giggling the whole time

"What on earth?" she exclaimed.

"It just felt right," Ben said. He knew he should have felt sheepish, but he didn't. He was proud to carry his bride in his arms into their new home.

"It did," Sadie agreed with a grin.

They stood in the dark of the house since Ben had abandoned his lantern to carry Sadie inside. Without hesitation, he gave her a chaste kiss.

The night sure was warmer with Sadie in his arms.

Once they finally separated, Ben brought the lantern inside and showed Sadie around the first floor of their new home.

"It's not much, but it's yours to care for. And we can decorate it however you want. Guess it will be easier to think about that tomorrow in the light of day." Ben laughed.

Sadie giggled again, and he turned to her, bringing her into another embrace.

"Do you like it?" he asked.

"I love it," Sadie replied, pecking his cheek. Then she leaped from his

arms and started floating from room to room, spreading her hands across the walls and furniture.

Ben lit another lantern so they could see better, and he reveled in the delight in Sadie's eyes.

"I just can't believe it," she started. It was almost as though she were in a daze, touching everything around her just to prove it was real.

"All this time, I lived out of those two trunks you saw today. And my bag. Always moving to some new town. Always starting over.

"I used the trunks as makeshift closets, and I kept my bag filled with everything dear to me. I never knew when my ma was going to decide it was time to leave.

"It was the only way to make sure I didn't keep losing things," she confessed.

Ben's heart cracked a bit hearing about the life Sadie had left behind. He knew she had traveled a lot, but he never knew the situation had been so dire.

"Sadie," he said.

"Oh, don't say my name like that. It's not something to pity. I've seen so much of the eastern seaboard. More than most women.

"Usually, only well-to-do men have that privilege, right? That's what Ma liked to say when she would get wistful. I think it made her feel better about running."

"What was she running from?"

"I don't know. I thought about it so many times. Was it people she didn't like? Or just the idea of having to see the same people every day, go to the same places, do the same things.

“Was there something about it that bored her? I guess because I don’t know what that’s like, I can’t imagine that feeling of boredom,” Sadie said thoughtfully.

Ben could imagine how Sadie’s mother might have felt at times. When his parents fought terribly when he was a kid, he would fantasize about leaving.

He didn’t know of anywhere he could have actually gone, but he’d invent places, imagining a town he could run to overnight and find peace.

Ben loved his family too much to ever run, though. The fantasy had always been enough for him.

“I’m so grateful I don’t have to live my life like I’m on the run anymore. I can finally plant roots the way I’ve been dreaming—the way I was never allowed before.”

“I hope that being here gives you all the things you’ve been wishing for,” Ben found himself saying. He was close to Sadie now, and he took her hands in his.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes glimmering in the low lantern light.

Ben kissed her once more, this time with passion, before taking her by the hand to see the rest of the house. As they walked, all he could think was what a remarkable woman she was.

He’d never met anyone like her, anyone so exuberant and present in her life and able to articulate her thoughts so well no matter who she was talking to.

He could tell how genuinely grateful she was to be there by his side, and it made Ben happy. It was as though all his work on the house and pulling this life together for them had paid off.

Sadie was happy to be there with him, and Ben never wanted to lose

that feeling. Not just because he'd never felt it before, but because he was happy to be there with her, too.

At that moment, Ben felt incredibly lucky to be standing in the home his brother had helped build and starting a new life with his wife. It was a day he could never have imagined even half a year ago, but he was content and even a little excited.

He didn't know life could be like this, and he certainly didn't know there were women like Sadie. A life by her side would be nothing short of interesting.

As the two stood looking over the open kitchen and parlor, they found each other's gazes in silence. Ben caught a glint in her eyes, and it gave him butterflies.

This was new to him, too.

Early the next morning, Sadie rose with the sun, waking even before Ben had risen. She dressed and washed speedily and then headed to the main house.

The sunrise over the horizon looked gorgeous as she walked; Sadie couldn't remember a time before when she had awoken at dawn and felt so cheerful.

Usually, if she saw this time of day, it was because she was on the move with her mother and headed to someplace unknown to her.

That morning, everything felt different. She had woken in her own home she shared with her husband, and now she headed to the family home to help her mother-in-law.

Sadie was so happy she could cry, but instead, she just beamed and shuffled along the dusty grass as quickly as she could. Even though they had walked to the home in the dark, it was easy to traverse the ranch.

She could see the large homestead in the distance once she had walked along the river some, and then she spotted the pastures of cattle and crop fields surrounding the house itself.

Everything looked a bit majestic to her that morning. Sadie felt like the property was so vast she could hardly imagine how large it really was. And it was her home.

All this land, and everything and everyone on it, was hers to care for and cherish. The smile never dropped from her face for the entire walk, despite how chilly the morning was.

Sadie recalled the events of the day before as she walked. She hadn't expected to marry quite so quickly, but there had been no reason to wait.

Ben made her feel so special. He had a way of looking at her that made her heart beat a little too fast. It wasn't something she had ever experienced before, but she liked it, and she felt thrilled it was happening with her new husband.

Responding to a mail-order bride ad hadn't given her hope for a true romantic spark, but it seemed she had been incredibly lucky somehow.

Well, lucky in most ways. But Sadie hadn't forgotten yesterday's complications. Ben hadn't been the most truthful with her, and even though she had no intention of holding it over him, the problem remained.

Sadie had no doubt that she would give her all to the family. The Fieldses were kind people, even if she had encountered an unbecoming side of them when she'd first arrived.

But she had no intention of living in the shadow of some ongoing feud or giving up her dreams of finding real community in Cottonwood Springs.

There was no way the townspeople thought the feud was acceptable. If they hadn't made it known to Ben or his parents, it didn't matter, because she knew any half-decent folk wouldn't find that kind of behavior agreeable or desirable.

And to think that the Larabees were committing crimes and getting away with it—it was too shocking for Sadie to really understand.

Why was the marshal turning a blind eye? And the townsfolk? No one would want crime and untoward behavior to thrive in their community.

There was something about the whole situation that didn't quite add up to Sadie, but she couldn't put her finger on it. All she could think was that if the citizens weren't close, then perhaps they hadn't gathered enough to discuss the situation.

And certainly, if they did gather, most reasonable people would be of the same mind—that crime and wrongdoing wasn't something to accept in the community.

It was a muddle to Sadie, so she shook her head to rid herself of the thoughts for the time being. Her first step was to meet some people from town; then, she could consider bigger and bolder things.

When she arrived at the Fieldses' house, Sadie let herself in the door quietly. There were no lanterns lit and the fire hadn't been started in the hearth yet, so she assumed the older couple must still be sleeping.

Sadie quickly tended to the fire and built it up to a modest size, then made her way around the kitchen, familiarizing herself with all that was there.

It was a large kitchen with cupboards and counters made of exquisite wood she had never seen before. Even though she knew the Fieldses were not the most well-to-do in the town, they had resources she just wasn't accustomed to.

She spent a moment just touching the wood, then looking through all the cupboards to take note of the ingredients and where everything was housed. There were more than enough eggs, bacon, and bread to make a lovely breakfast, so Sadie set about doing just that.

By the time Harriet and Eli Fields rose and found Sadie cooking in the kitchen, she had made coffee and a big dish of fluffy scrambled eggs. The bacon was frying, and she was even warming the day-old bread in

a thick dish over the stove.

“My goodness, Sadie. You’ve gone to such trouble. You shouldn’t have,” Harriet said.

“It’s no trouble at all. I wanted to show my gratitude the best way I know how,” Sadie returned.

“This looks hearty for the day ahead. But where is that son of mine? Not still sleeping, I hope.”

Sadie smiled, hoping Ben would walk through the front door at any moment. She was hoping to impress him, too, not just his parents.

She had no idea what Ben’s days were like, though, other than what he wrote in the letters. He would be busy from sunup to sundown, so she might not see much of him.

But that didn’t matter; it would make her happy knowing they were both hard at work trying to make the ranch into an even bigger success.

“These eggs aren’t like anything I tasted before,” Eli said. Sadie could hear the surprise in his voice and figured he must have sneaked a forkful while her back was turned to the table.

“Glad you like them,” she said. “I guess they looked so good you couldn’t wait.”

Eli chuckled at her teasing. “Too old to wait, my dear. Just see when you get to my age.”

“Now, now,” Harriet added, gently rolling her eyes.

Just as Sadie was finally ready to dish everything out onto the expectant plates, Ben arrived, seeming thankful to have found her.

“You gave me a fright this morning. I was wondering where you ran

off to,” he said.

“Just wanted to do my best on our first morning as husband and wife,” Sadie said.

She didn’t want to be untoward in front of his parents, but she couldn’t help flashing her eyes in his direction as she spoke. Ben blushed and sat at the table opposite his father, and Sadie happily served up breakfast to everyone.

“This is just delightful, Sadie. I can’t remember the last time someone made me breakfast,” Harriet said.

“You’ll fit right in around here, my girl,” Eli added.

Ben looked thrilled but didn’t have much to say, and Sadie didn’t mind. She was happy to see him eating his way through his plate so swiftly.

“What a wonderful wife you’ve taken,” Harriet said, smiling at Ben.

Sadie appreciated the compliments as she’d wanted to make another great impression. But something else was driving her as she whipped around the room to put on another pot of coffee.

This was the first time she had a real and decent-sized kitchen to cook in. Growing up, the places her mother had rented were anything from boarding houses to makeshift tenements, and if there was a kitchen, it was usually dark, drab, and impossibly small.

Sometimes there wasn’t even anything to cook on even if the room itself had a counter and a sink.

That morning was a brand new experience for her. She was cooking with fresh, ample ingredients in a lovely space in a beautiful town in California she now got to call home.

It made Sadie want to work as hard as possible, not only so she could

prove herself and show her appreciation, but also so she could enjoy every single moment of her time.

She wouldn't take anything for granted.



Later that morning, after Sadie had wished Ben well as he headed out onto the ranch for his day of work, she began her day in earnest alongside Harriet Fields.

Although Ben had hinted that there was a lot of work to catch up on, Sadie figured she needed to start with the basics. And the most straightforward thing to do was to spend a day alongside Harriet to see what her routine was.

It would also give her a chance to get to know her mother-in-law better.

First, they spent two hours in the garden just south of the main house. It was a large patch of vegetables, some Sadie had never seen before.

They pulled some from the ground and piled them high in a basket, and then fetched water to dampen the soil of the remaining vegetables. Fetching the water was quite a chore as they had to walk a way to get to the well that tapped into the river at the rear of the property.

It was easier than heading all the way to the river each time they needed water, but it wasn't as easy as the water readily available in towns she'd lived in before. Luckily, there was some water left over for her to wash the dirt off her hands once they finished.

"There, now why don't we take that basket inside for later and pick up the feed for the chickens?"

Sadie nodded happily. The work was tiring, and it seemed more tiring than the factory job she had previously, but it was much more

pleasant being outdoors and with good company.

She had fresh air and sunlight, even if the fatigue was already setting in.

Once they had collected what Harriet had instructed was the correct feed for the chickens, the two walked to the chicken coop near the ranch's barns. It looked like a little house and was rather cute, but Sadie noticed a peculiarly strong smell within a few feet of the door.

"Oh, my goodness," she cried.

"Don't be put off by the likes of that. You'll be used to it in no time," Harriet returned.

Following her elder, Sadie entered the coop and dished out feed to the many chickens living inside. It didn't take long for her to become accustomed to the smell, and soon she was thinking how adorable the little chickens were.

Then, Harriet scooped up a few eggs into the basket she held and the two headed back to the homestead.

"This is what we do every morning. There aren't crops in the small garden to harvest each day, but you need to take a good look over them and make sure everything is in good condition.

"Most of those vegetables we keep to eat ourselves or sell off in small batches to the general store," Harriet explained.

Sadie nodded, mentally noting everything she said. She was a little curious about what made the ranch profitable, but she didn't want to ask such a forward question quite yet.

"The chickens lay eggs regularly; you should check on them twice a day. Not many coyotes in these parts, but you never can be too sure. Sometimes they have a way of sneaking in."

“Coyotes? Are they dangerous?”

“Not so much to us, but sure as heck to those poor little hens.”

Sadie wondered if she'd need to protect herself once she started tending to her duties on her own. “Should I be careful?”

“Oh no, dear. Well, you should always be careful, but there are bigger evils out here than a stray coyote that might wander onto the land.”

“Do you mean snakes?”

Harriet laughed, and Sadie was a little puzzled. She knew there were some creatures she needed to mind in California, especially if she helped out in the barn.

Even digging in and around the garden might unearth something poisonous.

“Why no, dear. Worst thing around here is those darned Larabees.”

Sadie could hear the venom in her voice and was a little annoyed. The morning had been going so well, and she felt like she was learning a lot about working on the ranch, but it seemed like the Larabees were never far from the mind of a Fields.

Sadie didn't like how preoccupied everyone seemed, and she hadn't wanted to spend more time on this subject quite yet.

“They're a nasty bunch. Can't trust 'em and certainly can't guess what they'll try out next.”

“Surely they would never do anything to hurt one of us,” Sadie said, trying to challenge Harriet's thinking. It took her a moment to realize she'd used the word 'us,' and then she felt a little elated, even in the bizarre circumstances.

“I wouldn't put anything past 'em. You can only trust your own out

here.”

There was that idea again. It seemed Ben had inherited that stymied view from his parents directly. Sadie felt a twinge of disappointment again.

In her mind, putting family first shouldn't come at the cost of others or lead to despising them.

“Eli will make sure you're comfortable defending yourself. But it's nothing to be alarmed about. All women living on a ranch need to be tough.”

Sadie knew she should be a little shocked by what Harriet said, but she had known about the West's reputation. She hadn't expected it to be like the towns she'd moved between back east.

Some people said the West was still lawless, and Sadie wondered if there was truth to that.

“Isn't there a marshal in these parts?” She recalled some of the argument that had greeted her yesterday afternoon.

“There is, but he's not to be relied upon. Doesn't believe the Larabees are the way they are. We've had no help from him in all the years we've had these troubles.”

Sadie found it a bit odd that the marshal would overlook wrongdoing in his own jurisdiction. “Is he corrupt?”

Harriet thought for a moment, then continued, “I don't believe so, but I guess you never do know. The Larabees could have bought him off.

“Mostly, it just seems the Larabees are too tricky in what they do. We've never been able to prove they were behind anything to a degree the marshal would accept.

“But we know it was them,” Harriet insisted. “Couldn't have been

anyone else.”

“What sorts of things have they done?”

“Rustled cattle from our land off and on for years. They’ve come into that coop we were just in and taken hens a few times. Broken fences. Damaged gardens and crops.

“They’ve even stolen customers out from under us. You name it, seems they’ve done it.”

Harriet seemed almost resigned to it all, which made Sadie a little sad. She had been living with these problems with the Larabees for so long she’d become accustomed to it all.

But Sadie wasn’t. She couldn’t believe that a family on a neighboring ranch would do such awful things, all to cause problems and disrupt the Fieldses’ livelihood.

It seemed downright evil to her, and she didn’t like it.

“Things just seem like they’re getting worse, too,” Harriet added. “It’s been at least once a week lately something’s gone on.

“Then, you got the Larabees running over here like they did yesterday, crying wolf. The nerve of them to suggest *we* would harm *them*.”

As they neared the house, Sadie wasn’t sure what to do with the information Harriet had shared. Sadie thought it all sounded awful, and that the Larabees must be terrible people, but she didn’t want it to affect her outlook on her new home.

Even though the Larabees were apparently the worst neighbors anyone could imagine, Sadie was sure the entire town couldn’t be like that. If anything, wouldn’t the town have had just about enough with that family’s antics?

It was all strange when Sadie thought it over, though she didn’t doubt

the pain it caused Harriet and her family.

The two women returned to the house and set about cleaning it and tidying it, and then working on a batch of laundry. Laundry was always tough work, especially scrubbing the thick denim Eli and Ben wore around the ranch.

When they were finished, both women were certain they needed a rest, but after five minutes in the parlor, Sadie was back up on her feet.

“Goodness, you do have a lot of energy,” Harriet said.

Sadie’s body was exhausted, but she’d just had an idea, and the adrenaline was pumping as she realized she could carry it out if she hurried.

“Is there much more you’d like to show me today?”

“No, dear, we’ve done more than enough. Why don’t you get some rest in one of the bedrooms upstairs? You must still be tired from your journey and all this change.

“Change has a way of tiring a person,” her mother-in-law said thoughtfully.

Sadie knew she was right about everything, but she didn’t want to give in to the fatigue just yet. There was something more pressing she needed to do.

After all, the most important thing to Sadie was finding her way in the community. And she wasn’t about to let one family of bad apples spoil her chance at making Cottonwood Springs a happy home and caring community.

Sadie had a plan in mind, and she wouldn’t let herself be deterred by anyone.

Sadie hurried back to the little house by the river to wash up and dress. After making a cup of tea for Harriet and even spending an extra hour baking some pastries, she finally let herself off the hook for any more chores.

She'd made many pastries, which had puzzled Harriet, but her mother-in-law never questioned her. Sadie had simply packed up the extras and taken them back to the house with her.

She dressed in her cream gown once again, careful to ensure it was spruced up and looking fresh despite her having worn it the day before. Sadie knew she would need to get just a few more dresses eventually, but she wasn't sure what the styles were like in California.

She didn't want to drop the last of her savings on dresses that were either too dull or too extravagant to make a good impression. So, for now, she would wear her trusty cream dress and hope she would blend in well with the townspeople.

While she was packing her bag in the kitchen, Ben walked through the door looking worse for wear. His denim pants were covered in mud.

"Gosh, Ben, what's happened?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing too extraordinary. Chasing after some cattle and slipped fell in all kinds of dirt and muck."

She felt sympathy for him, but when she noticed him taking off his

boots indoors, she ran to stop him.

“Wait, wait! Don’t... you’ll spread the dirt all around the house.”

Sadie loved that they had their own home, but the fact that she would need to put in triple duty to care for her home, the Fieldses, and the ranch was just starting to dawn on her.

Ben stood with wide eyes. It was clear he didn’t know what to do.

“Step back onto the porch and take off everything dirty out there. I’ll wash it for you later.”

She didn’t know when later might be, but if it ended up being dawn, that was just the way things would have to be.

Ben walked out to the porch and yanked his boots off. Mud flew in all directions on the porch, and Sadie hid behind the door. He was about to come back inside when she halted him.

“Your pants, too. They’re caked with mud.”

His face went cherry red as he tried to argue with her.

“I’m sorry, but you’re just going to have to take them off. Here, let me get you another pair of pants, and you can change while I’m gone.”

Sadie could feel herself starting to blush, too, so she was happy to have a reason to leave for a minute.

“Well, okay then.”

She closed the door on Ben but couldn’t help giggling for a minute. It would be funny to swing the door wide open and surprise him—he’d certainly yell out.

But Sadie didn’t. She hurried to find another pair of denim trousers and then waited for him to crack open the door and stick his arm

through.

“Your pants, cowboy,” she said, stifling her giggles.

He took them with speed and shut the door, then finally returned fully clothed.

As she looked at his blazing auburn hair, broad shoulders, and the muscled legs in his denim, Sadie nearly swooned. She hoped this wasn't some long, drawn-out dream she was about to wake from.

“You fixing to go somewhere?” Ben asked. He was looking at the bag she had filled with sewing supplies and pastries.

“Just heading into town for a little while.”

Ben nodded, and she could tell he wanted to ask her more but chose not to. She wasn't sure what he'd say if she told him her plans for the rest of the day, so she was glad to be given a bit of space.

“You think you can remember the way back to town by the trail? You gotta head right once you leave our property.”

Sadie nodded, but was happy for the reminder.

“And the horse?”

That was one thing Sadie hadn't thought much about. Suddenly, she found it rather serendipitous that Ben had returned to the house when he did.

The two headed over to the stables where the horses were kept, and Ben saddled up the same mount she had ridden the day before.

It was a tall, lean chestnut-hued horse with white-capped hooves. Sadie hadn't seen many horses this close-up, and it was the only horse she'd ever ridden, but she thought it rather grand.

Ben helped her up on the horse and gave her a few pointers so she'd recall how to handle the animal and know what to do if it got spooked. He seemed more worried than she was, and Sadie found that endearing.

The fact that it would be her second time on a horse didn't faze her, or that she'd be riding alone. As she brought the horse to a slow trot, she waved goodbye to Ben and headed for the trail to town.

She was eager to see the town on her own and hopefully speak to some of the women of Cottonwood Springs.

The afternoon was perfectly summery and an even temperature. She had worn her overcoat, but more so for her return trip in the evening when she knew it would be much cooler.

Sadie couldn't get over how fair the weather was in California. Compared to the East, it was just so pleasant. No blustery, frigid winds. No spells of endless rain.

And, from everything she heard, she could expect there would be no snowfalls. It seemed too good to be true.

So many nights she had spent on the floor of the wagon freezing in the winter weather. If Sadie never saw snow again, it wouldn't bother her in the least.

As she rode toward town, her nerves slowly began to creep on her and let themselves be known. Ben's words about how the town wasn't close-knit were repeating in her mind.

She'd seen fractured communities before—places where it seemed like everyone was out for themselves and people were only friends if it benefited them somehow.

She had hated those places the most and, thankfully, so had her mother. If Cottonwood Springs was one of those places, Sadie wasn't sure how well her plan would go.

Yet she reminded herself that despite everything, she'd never had trouble making acquaintances.

Even though there was no one from her past lives she could call a friend—except for maybe Bertha of Pennsylvania, whom she thought about from time to time—Sadie didn't have a hard time commanding attention and ingratiating herself with others.

It was an important skill when she had been stuck in a cycle of starting over, and she hoped it would be just as useful now that she had no intention of ever starting over again.

The women there couldn't have been much different from the women she'd met all over the countryside. Perhaps they had different challenges and fewer conveniences in California, but Sadie believed people were fundamentally the same to some degree.

And perhaps all the community needed was someone to bring them closer together. Sadie knew she was optimistic, but sometimes all it took was someone to make a suggestion and bring people together for things to start changing.

The ride into town seemed quicker than her arrival the day before, and Sadie was pleased to see the streets busy in the late afternoon.

It was as small as she remembered, but given that there was more than just a main road in the town lined with shops, she could see how the town must have grown over time.

She rode down the main thoroughfare once, taking in all the sights, then found a convenient hitching post to tie up her horse.

Once again, she slipped down the side of the horse with what she assumed was little grace and briefly panicked, wondering how she would mount the horse to go home.

Ben had said to use the stirrups and hold tightly to the leather seat, but Sadie wasn't about to spend too much time thinking about it. She

would deal with it when the time came.

Sadie looked down the thoroughfare at the dirt road and boardwalks lining the shops and houses. There were wagons and horses parked all over, and people here and there milling about.

It wasn't as lively as the cities she was used to, but there was energy. Sadie had a good feeling as she began to walk down the boardwalk.

There was a restaurant and a large general store to the right, and she figured those would be the most likely places to meet some of the local women. She wasn't sure how many women worked long hours in Cottonwood Springs.

It wasn't a factory town, but it also wasn't the easiest place to live. There was a chance there might be no women about this time of day or during the week, and Sadie briefly wondered if the best strategy might be to attend a service with the local pastor on a Sunday.

That was one certain way to meet with the local community, though Sadie had never been overly religious.

She walked confidently with her basket of goodies toward the restaurant but didn't see many people inside or out, and she hoped it was just the awkward time of day.

As she walked further toward the general store, she noticed quite a few ladies with parasols chatting in front of the store. They weren't the fine parasols she'd seen in larger cities like Charleston or New York, but they were quaint and well taken care of.

The women wore simple but becoming day dresses, and Sadie wondered if these were the married women of town who were lucky to have a little leisure time given their husbands' success.

Plucking up her courage with haste, Sadie walked over to the group of ladies and interjected to get their attention.

Even though she was certain she was interrupting some conversation, Sadie didn't want to hesitate. If she waited for the perfect moment, she might be waiting forever.

"Good afternoon," she said. It sounded a bit formal and fancy, but she didn't want to make the wrong impression.

"Afternoon," a few of the ladies returned.

"I'm new in town, and I'm looking for some ladies to join me in a quilting bee. It's nothing too complicated or onerous, but I thought with the colder months fast approaching, starting now would be the best idea."

Sadie smiled, but not too broadly. She had tried to sound as friendly and approachable as she could, but not without strength.

It was all too common for people to sense any weakness and become instantly impassive. Sadie had learned that lesson the hard way.

The ladies looked on, and it was clear they were interested, but it seemed like they needed to hear a bit more. Sadie thought it was possible they hadn't encountered a quilting bee before, so she kept her confidence as she spoke on.

"A quilting bee is something you can bring any of your projects to, even if it isn't quilting. Anything you're sewing or making. And we're all there to help each other along.

"I've done a fair bit of sewing so I'd be happy to show some new techniques from back east," she added. "I was recently a seamstress in a factory."

A tall woman with a stiff blonde bun let her jaw drop for a moment before catching herself. And a few of the other women had wide eyes and puzzled faces.

This wasn't the reaction Sadie had hoped for and she wondered if

maybe these women were fancier than she had thought. She wasn't sure what wealth looked like in the West; maybe a factory worker wouldn't be able to have any sway in a community that was rather well-to-do.

"It's also a social occasion. We can have tea and eat finger sandwiches and cake. Or anything else that may appeal."

While she was talking, a few women from inside the general store had stopped out front to listen. It seemed like they had a bit of curiosity in her idea, too.

"I just think it would be a wonderful way to bring the women of the town together. If there are any fall fairs here or in the neighboring towns, we can even create items to showcase. Doesn't it sound splendid?"

Sadie was hoping her enthusiasm would be contagious if she just kept talking, and it seemed her instincts were right. A few of the women were now smiling and their eyes had gone from cold and uncertain to warm and inviting.

"What do we need to bring to a quilting bee?" asked a woman with ivory skin and stark, dark hair.

"Well, whatever you're working on right now. Or maybe something you'd like to start."

"When would we start?" another asked.

"I thought we could start now, if anyone was interested. I have pastries and my supplies in hand."

She lifted her bag to show how prepared and eager she was.

"Well, goodness. This is such a surprise. I think most of us have never heard of a quilting bee nor ever had a social occasion so spur of the moment," the dark-haired woman said.

“I would be happy to host whoever wants to come. My house is close by and ample in space,” a woman in glasses said.

“That sounds lovely,” Sadie said. “If anyone else would like to bring some sweets or treats, please do feel free. We can never have too much to pass around. And, of course, the more, the merrier.”

Sadie beamed. She was rather aware she had just invited people over to someone else’s house and encouraged them to bring food, too, and all without ever having spoken a word to these women before.

She had no idea what they thought of her, but it didn’t matter. It seemed her plan was working out perfectly.

Sadie soon found herself walking along the thoroughfare with a small group of women, headed to Cecile Langdon's house.

She was the woman with perfectly braided dark hair who had offered her home, and it was only a short walk from where they'd met in front of the general store. Sadie was still beaming at how well everything had gone, but she knew the real work was still yet to be done.

She would need to lead these women in the quilting bee and foster a social atmosphere.

When they arrived at Cecile's house, Sadie was happily surprised to see a quaint little home with a large parlor that would fit the seven or so women who had joined them for the bee.

Cecile welcomed everyone warmly and ensured each lady had a space to sit, then excused herself to make tea for everyone. Sadie took the opportunity to follow her into the kitchen.

"Thank you so much for agreeing to host the quilting bee in your home, even though you just met me," Sadie said.

"It's my pleasure, Sadie. To be honest, I've never heard of such a thing. It seems novel. Our community doesn't host a lot of events."

"Really? Why do you think that is?" Sadie hoped her question wasn't too nosy.

“Not too sure, really. Guess no one ever really thought about it.” Cecile busied herself in the kitchen and Sadie put her pastries on the counter.

She didn’t want to push further by asking more questions, but Sadie was curious about what was keeping everyone in Cottonwood Springs so distanced from one another.

Sadie helped Cecile bring all the refreshments into the parlor and noticed the ladies looking a little lost. A few had gone back to their houses to pick up their sewing materials and current projects, and now they sat with materials in their laps, looking at Sadie for direction.

“Usually what happens at a quilting bee is that each person brings their fabric to make squares for their quilt. But what makes it special is that we make blocks for each other’s quilts, too, so in the end, we all end up with beautiful quilts that we helped each other make.

“It’s a very special thing,” Sadie said. It was a little awkward standing in the parlor and addressing everyone like it was some town hall meeting, but she knew the group needed it.

“Goodness me, but I haven’t started making a quilt,” an elderly woman named Gladys said.

“That’s not a problem. You can start a quilt today, or you could just carry on with another project. It’s our first meeting, so it would be wise to keep it simple.”

Sadie knew too well that any slight complication could demotivate the women. She’d noticed this with people over the years in different towns.

If people felt resistant to trying something new, anything that made the task hard would cause people to give up, more often than not.

So many times, she had tried to teach other children games she knew

from other towns. Sadie had just wanted a little continuity, but it was too hard to win people over at times.

“Well, okay then,” Gladys said. “I’ll start up a quilt today. Don’t know what bed I’ll put it on, but that doesn’t matter, does it?”

A few of the women smiled and nodded, but Sadie noticed a young blonde woman in the corner covering a giggle. She wore a pretty dress with ruffles, but the dress looked dusty, leaving Sadie to wonder if she lived outside of town.

“To get organized, we should see how many people intend to make squares to share, and then take a look at the fabric. Making quilting squares isn’t hard, so don’t worry if you haven’t done it before.”

Sadie spent quite some time organizing the women before they were ready to start sewing.

Most of the women were happy to begin quilts, with only one or two opting to work on their own projects. And there was a delightful range of fabrics within the group.

Sadie was sure the quilts would look stunning once finished.

Once they decided on the size of the squares and the number needed, Sadie began instructing those who were starting on their squares before setting to work on her own.

Most of the women seemed to have plenty of experience sewing, but she was happy to give pointers here and there based on what she’d learned over the years in different towns and due to her last job.

She was careful not to be overly pedantic, but Sadie loved seeing the women’s eyes light up when she gave them a method that eased things.

When she ultimately sat down, she felt a little emotional. Finally, Sadie was getting the experience she had longed for.

Surrounding her were women from her community who had agreed to come together to sew and socialize and make beautiful quilts together—quilts that would bear the work of each community member who participated.

Sadie almost loved that part most; the very idea that she would have a quilt to keep with her for the rest of her life made of squares crafted by the women of her community made her ever so happy. It filled her heart, and she felt content.

Sadie began to work on her first square, noticing how quiet the room had become. She wasn't sure if she should keep leading the women or if she should just let the socializing take its natural course.

It wouldn't be great to break their concentration now that they had begun, but Sadie was still itching to make things a little livelier. If it was just shyness preventing people from talking, she wanted to get past it as soon as possible.

"What does the town do to celebrate Christmas every year?" Sadie found herself asking; she was unable to resist.

"What, Christmas? Well, it's good if we have time to notice." The woman beside her smirked. "Nina," she said, holding out her hand. "We didn't get a chance to be acquainted."

Sadie was pleased she was more forward than the others.

"Does everyone work too hard to take some time for Christmas? You know, it's a bonafide holiday now."

A few of the women smiled but no one spoke except Nina.

"We just have long days here, that's all. Many of us are out on ranches or helping to run services here in town."

Sadie understood, but she still felt a little surprised. "What about the town's mayor? Isn't there anything that gets organized?"

The room went a little quiet, and then Sadie heard Nina giggle once again. Soon, the ladies dropped their heads to continue sewing, so Sadie whispered to Nina.

“Does the town not have a mayor?”

“Oh, we do. It’s just our mayor isn’t exactly one for organizing anything,” she returned quietly. “There’s a meeting maybe once a month where people talk out grievances but not many people attend. If you’re looking for a happy-go-lucky place, I’m not sure you’ve found it.”

Nina smirked, but Sadie couldn’t help feeling disappointed.

“Surely it’s not that bad,” she said.

“No, it isn’t. The mayor’s just a little inconsequential, is all. The real problems don’t even get brought to his silly meetings.”

“I see,” Sadie replied.

Every detail she was learning about Cottonwood Springs was painting an odd picture. It just didn’t seem like the members of the community were working well together, or even looking out for one another.

“Things aren’t so bad, though. Just all these men playing cowboys. How could one expect anything else?” Nina was grinning with a twinkle in her eye, and Sadie did her best not to laugh heartily. She’d never heard it put like that, but it was true.

The West was wild, and everyone had come out this way to make a life for themselves, adopting the ways of the arid terrain. Men dressing up like cowboys and ranchers one day, when the day before they were just East Coast city dwellers.

The same could be said for women like her, she figured.

Sadie talked for quite a while to Nina, stopping here and there to

check in on the other women. Tea was served twice more by Cecile and all the pastries Sadie bought were eaten swiftly.

When the women were tiring and it was time to head home before the sun set over the horizon, Sadie felt accomplished. The first quilting bee had been a pleasant experience.

The group had even decided on their next meeting and set some goals for how many squares to have completed by that time.

Sadie loved seeing the smiles on the women's faces, even if they were shier than she expected. Over time that would change; she was sure of it.

It turned out Nina was heading back on horseback in the same direction Sadie had come from. The two separated to gather their horses then met up in the thoroughfare.

Sadie couldn't help but smile as they rode as a pair down the road and out onto the trail that led toward her home. Her new life was even better than she imagined.

Nina was likely a neighbor, or she at least lived not too far away, and was someone Sadie already enjoyed speaking with. Perhaps she would be her first real friend as a married woman.

"How long have you lived out here?" Sadie asked.

"Oh, just a couple years. Not really long at all. I came from New York City, and my parents thought I had lost my mind when I told them my plans.

"But there wasn't much for people like us in the city. Jobs were hard to come by and the living conditions were just getting worse, not better. I can't say I miss it."

Sadie's heart ached just a little. It was clear Nina had had a difficult life as well, and the chance at something better had brought her west.

“Things weren’t so easy for me either, but I just kept telling myself there had to be a better life somewhere, somehow,” she agreed.

“I knew in my heart there was. Even though it was a huge risk coming all this way and not knowing what would be waiting for me on the other side.

“You know, not knowing if things would really be as I thought they would... but I figured nothing could be as hard as factory work in New York,” Nina said with a chuckle.

“I just started at a factory when my plans to go west came together. I couldn’t envision a life like that—stuck in a factory day in and day out.

“Guess I’m not the strongest woman there is.” Sadie laughed.

“Don’t be silly, Sadie. It takes guts and strength to come out here and do as you’ve done. I mean, you’ve only gone and brought a bunch of women together who barely talked to one another unless it was unseemly gossip.

“I’ve never seen those women together for more than fifteen minutes, and you had us captive for a good couple of hours!”

Sadie laughed again. Nina tickled her with the way she spoke at times.

She had a perspective Sadie found refreshing, and Sadie could already see herself wanting to spend more time with Nina, just the two of them.

“Is there anything you don’t like about being here?” Sadie asked.

“Well, I really wanted to feel what it was like to be in a small community where people helped each other. In New York, in our building, there were a few families who were friendly, but there was still this feeling of competition and distance.

“Oh, that probably sounds really strange to you. I just mean that with so few jobs going, it was almost like every family just was out for themselves. I guess they had to be.”

Nina’s voice sounded sad to Sadie, and she couldn’t help wondering if leaving New York had been bittersweet for her.

It hadn’t been easy for Sadie to leave her mother, especially with the way things were left, but Sadie had been so exasperated and tired of her mother’s ways it had almost made it easier—though that very fact made her feel guilty.

“It doesn’t sound funny at all. Life out east was hard. I never felt community either, but I had little opportunity to. My mother insisted we move around often, and I just felt like as soon as I got to know one place, I’d be saying *so long*.”

“That must have been dreadful,” Nina said thoughtfully.

Sadie could tell she was sincere, and it mended part of her heart a bit to feel heard and understood.

“Things aren’t really all golden here, if I’m being honest. It’s true that I’m much happier than in New York, but my husband is struggling on our ranch.

“Things keep happening to set back our work, and it just seems like he’s becoming defeated by it all. The ranch is barely profitable as it is.”

It was surprising to hear that another ranch was experiencing the kind of problems Sadie was encountering on the Fields ranch. She knew the Fieldses had struggled for years, but that things had come to a tipping point recently.

“My husband’s family ranch has dealt with much the same. I came here wanting to help—to really make a difference. But it’s not as easy once you’re here.

“I just hope little by little, each day, we’ll turn things around somehow,” she said.

The horizon had darkened to pinks and oranges, but Sadie could still see Nina’s face clearly. She looked sympathetic to the situation, and Sadie felt it was some odd happenstance that the two understood one another so well.

They had similar backgrounds coming from cities back east, and now they were experiencing the same challenges here in Cottonwood Springs.

At least perhaps they could become friends and share their difficulties with one another. Sadie hoped that would be the case.

As the horses walked along, the Larabee ranch came into view. Sadie was already a bit wary of how she couldn’t get home without seeing it.

She wished there was another path or trail, but she knew there wasn’t. Every time she rode to town, she’d just have to accept the reminder.

Not wanting to hint at anything to Nina, she kept her eyes front and tried to smile.

“Well, this would be my ranch. It’s been just lovely riding with you, Sadie. I’m so glad you came to town today and had the courage to bring some of us folk together. It was such a surprise, but a happy one.”

Nina steered the horse onto the Larabee ranch and then stilled, beaming at Sadie. But the blood drained from Sadie’s face and for a moment, she felt lightheaded.

This can’t be...

“What? What is it, Sadie? Is something wrong?”

Sadie tried to speak, but only stammering came out. A wave of disappointment and fear washed over her. How could it be that the first friend she made was none other than a Larabee?

“You’re... a Larabee?” she asked, knowing how dumb she sounded.

“Well, yes. My husband is Patrick Larabee. Do you know him?”

Sadie could’ve cried, but she stopped herself by giving in to the deep disappointment. “My husband is Ben Fields.”

She watched as Nina’s face dropped and her eyes filled with the same worry Sadie was sure hers showed.

“I... didn’t realize.”

“Neither did I.”

The two women sat on their horses in silence, and Sadie searched for the words somehow to make the situation better. Except there weren’t any words.

She’d somehow befriended the enemy.

All Sadie wanted was a sense of community and friends. Even just one true friend she could call her own, who would be there for her just like Bertha and the gang back in Pennsylvania.

She wanted to feel what it was like to be accepted and counted on, to be there for someone in turn, and to grow a friendship over years. And now Sadie was wondering if this dream was just not meant for her to realize.

The first woman she had a rapport with and genuinely liked was from the one family in town her new in-laws seemed to despise. It felt like some cruel joke.

“I don’t know what to say,” Nina said. Sadie hated seeing her look so

sad, even though it was exactly how she was feeling.

“Say you’ll see me at the next quilting bee in a few days,” Sadie said. She didn’t know if it was the right thing, but it was what her gut was telling her to say.

Despite everything, Sadie couldn’t just throw away the last few hours and the real connection they had made.

Maybe it would all amount to nothing when she realized the kind of person Nina really was—some conniving Larabee—but for now, Sadie wasn’t willing to give up.

Nina nodded, and Sadie smiled then left without another word. To her, the universe just had a funny way about it sometimes.

It was as though it wanted to give her what she desired, but not without trials to test her. Sadie just shook her head; she’d already lived a challenging life.

This couldn’t be any worse.

Ben sat across from Sadie at the small circular breakfast table in their home.

They had begun a nice pattern of enjoying breakfast together most mornings and joining his parents for breakfast on Sundays. It didn't feel routine in the least, but Ben was starting to relax into it and appreciate starting his mornings beside Sadie.

She was also so chipper, even in the early hours when her eyes were barely open.

The night before, Ben had worked late into evening. It was past ten when he came back to their home along the river, and Sadie had already gone to bed.

He was so tired he just sat eating some leftover bacon while staring at his plate, unable to think about much. No matter how much work he did in one day, it seemed like the chores just kept piling on with problem after problem.

It was leaving Ben exhausted, but he refused to give up, especially now that he had Sadie by his side. If anything, things should've been getting easier.

At some point they had to turn around.

That morning, he felt hopeful. The sun was rising, and the last few days had been sun-filled and warm, autumn days typical of California.

The day would be long once again, but Ben was determined to do as much as he could. Each day, Sadie was doing more and more to help, and Ben just hoped it would be enough.

As his wife drank her coffee and smiled at him, Ben suddenly realized he'd never had the chance to ask Sadie about her trip into town the day before. He knew she'd had some plan to start a social circle in town, but he hadn't heard the details or how things were going.

"I'm sorry I didn't see you before bed, Sadie. How are things going with your group?"

A huge smile crossed Sadie's face and her eyes sparkled, and Ben thought he'd never get used to such a beautiful sight.

"It's turned out so well. I mean, it took a bit of work and convincing at first. The ladies of this town are a little standoffish."

"Hmm, I guess I'm not surprised," Ben said. "No one here really does much of anything except work."

"The ladies made that quite clear." Sadie laughed. "They were shocked and a little suspicious at first, but once they saw I was enthusiastic, I won them over."

Ben was astonished. Sadie had come all this way and within just a couple weeks was already organizing social events for the women in town. She was a remarkable woman, and Ben couldn't believe how lucky he was to have her by his side.

"We'll continue getting together every few days to exchange squares and continue on. That's how it works. We help each other make quilts so at the end we all have a quilt made by the community."

"That sounds really special."

"It is." Sadie beamed.

It was hard for Ben not to feel proud.

As he rose from the table to wash his breakfast plate, he smiled to himself, thinking again about how wonderful Sadie was with everything she'd already accomplished.

"How long will it take to finish the quilts?"

"Well, today's the twentieth, so I think by this time next month, we might be close. Maybe even sooner if the ladies are very committed."

The date hung in Ben's head, and he nearly dropped his plate. Somehow, he'd forgotten that today was Peter's birthday.

The realization stung, and Ben braced against the counter to take a moment to collect himself.

"Ben, what is it? Is something wrong?"

He could hear the concern in her voice, and it hurt him, but he knew this subject was unavoidable. It had made sense to skirt it in all his letters to Sadie, but now that they were sharing a life together, he had to tell her about Peter.

"Sadie, do you want to take a walk along the river with me before we start our day?"

Her brow furrowed in worry, and Ben hated that he was making her lose her cheerfulness, but it was the right time. She agreed readily, and the two headed out on their walk.

As the two walked along the river, Ben took Sadie's hand in his own. "There's something I haven't told you," he started.

When Sadie just listened attentively, he continued.

"I had a brother. His name was Peter. He died earlier this year after a long illness that we all had expected him to beat. It's been an awful

blow.”

Sadie stopped and brought her other hand to the one he already held. The warmth of her hands brought him a little comfort.

“He was an amazing person. Resilient and happy. Just about everything I’m not, heck,” he said, kicking the dirt.

“Oh, Ben. Don’t say that,” Sadie said.

“It’s just the truth, Sadie. Peter had a solution for everything, and nothing ever fazed him. He was the only one who could keep the Larabees in check. Without him, it’s just felt like the ranch is sinking into quicksand.”

“It’s not sinking, Ben. I think maybe you’re taking too much of it onto your own shoulders.”

Ben knew what Sadie meant, but he couldn’t help how he felt. “My brother never felt the weight on his shoulders. He acted like it was nothing.”

“Peter sounds like he was an extraordinary person,” Sadie said kindly.

“He was, and I miss him every day. But no matter what I do, I can never be like Peter—I’ll never have his resolve or his fighting spirit. He was strong beyond belief. Never saw him back down or bothered by anything, really.”

“As wonderful as I’m sure he was, no one is perfect, Ben.”

“I know that, but he was darn near it. Our house... he built most of it all while running the ranch. He made it look so easy.

“When I knew you were coming, I was run ragged trying to finish it off while working the ranch. No idea how he did it with a smile on his face the entire time,” Ben confessed.

“We’re all built differently, that’s all. It’s not a defect to not be like him, you know.”

Sadie’s voice was so soft and caring, it eased Ben’s heart.

“I feel like I’m living in his shadow, no matter what I do. Like I can never live up to what he was.”

“But Ben, you don’t need to be who he was. Peter was a wonderful person and did so much, and he did it how he could. But you’re a different person.

“We don’t need you to be Peter,” she told him. “We need you to be Ben.”

The words stunned Ben. He’d never really thought of it that way before. He always got caught up in everything he wasn’t and gave little thought to what he was equipped to do.

Convincing himself that whatever he was would be enough wouldn’t be easy. And Ben wasn’t even sure if he could really believe it.

“Our house was going to be his house with whoever he met and chose for his wife. He had so many plans, and he was just barreling toward them with no worries.”

“Do you think he’d be happy to know you married and took over the house?”

Ben nodded; he had no doubt of that. That was the kind of person Peter was.

“Ben, your community needs you. And they need you just as you are. You have so much to give. If Peter would be happy to see the life you’ve created for yourself, you have to let that be enough.”

He almost felt tearful at her words, but Ben appreciated them more than he ever could’ve conveyed to her.

In some ways, he would never get over Peter's passing, but he was learning to live with it, and part of that was confronting these deep-seated feelings that he just couldn't do things as well as Peter had.

Ben knew his brother would've hated to see him struggle for that reason, and Sadie was right; he had to find a way to be himself and do things his way.

He couldn't become Peter, and he shouldn't want to. Ben finally understood that.

"How did you get so wise, huh?" Ben said, squeezing Sadie's hand.

"Dunno. Guess a life lived on the road will do that to you," Sadie said, winking in his direction.

Ben chuckled, feeling a little lighter. It was odd; losing Peter had been the worst experience of his life but yet here was a remarkable young woman shining love and light on him.

He hardly felt he deserved it, but Ben tried to fight those feelings, remembering all that Sadie had just said. Once again, he felt lucky.

He was lucky to have found Sadie and to have her by his side.

A few weeks later, Sadie was attending the latest quilting bee session at Cecile's house. They had rotated homes throughout the weeks as different ladies within the town had offered to host, and now they had returned to Cecile's.

This time, she had a variety of perfectly made tea sandwiches, scones, and pastries ready. When Sadie brought her pastries to the kitchen to offer them to Cecile, she could see there was no need.

"My goodness, Cecile. You are ever so talented in preparing tea. I've never seen such a beautiful spread of food."

Cecile looked flattered and insisted it was nothing, but Sadie could tell she had really gone to some trouble to serve a nice afternoon tea to the ladies in the parlor.

It all looked so good to Sadie she felt like convincing Cecile to open up a tea shop, but she didn't want to overstep. She knew her enthusiasm often outweighed that of others by several factors.

As she routinely did, Sadie took a seat beside Nina and began working on her squares. She had completed a full set and given a square to each participant, and now she was on to her second choice of fabric.

This time, it was a simple striped pattern she thought would bring some character to their quilts.

"Oh, what a lovely stripe your fabric has. Is that navy?" Nina asked.

“I think it’s navy, navy and cream. Very pretty, isn’t it?”

Nina nodded and smiled, and Sadie grinned back. Getting to know Nina over the past few weeks had been one of the best parts of Sadie’s days, even though it felt horrid keeping the friendship a secret from Ben.

Sadie rationalized it by telling herself it was just temporary; something was going to change, either the quilting bees would end or the feud with the Larabees would end, once and for all.

She hoped it would be the latter because the idea of having to ignore Nina or even grow to dislike her bothered her greatly.

At every quilting session, they sat beside each other and chatted all evening long, mostly to themselves but also with the wider group. Each session would be a tad livelier than the last, which made Sadie happy, but the women were still rather shy.

She hoped that by the time they finished their quilts, things would be dramatically different.

Riding home was always a slow affair so they could continue their conversation from the quilting bee, and as soon as the Larabee ranch would come into view, they would part ways, careful to not be seen together at all.

It felt surreptitious, which Sadie didn’t particularly like, but there was a slight thrill in it all.

Sometimes, they even hid notes for each other under a certain rock that was near the property line that separated their ranches. It had been Nina’s suggestion after the third quilting bee, and Sadie thought it a grand idea.

No one would know, and she could spend the walk back from the rock reading the letter happily in privacy.

A curious thing was happening, too. The more Sadie learned about Nina and the Larabees, the less sense the entire feud made.

Nina was a good person; she helped out neighbors that lived on the other side of the Larabees. The neighbors were elderly and infirm, and even her husband Patrick would spend time with them and help Nina maintain their home from time to time.

They just didn't seem the type to engage in illegal activity, but Sadie had to admit she hadn't known many criminals in her lifetime. Perhaps they weren't entirely bad; they just did bad things sometimes.

The Larabees had lived in Cottonwood Springs as long as the Fieldses had, and it appeared the two elders had even had some school in the town together as children when the town was first being built up.

Nina had said they had been friends growing up, but somewhere along the line, things changed. And the feud began in earnest once the Fields ranch was up and running beside the Larabee's.

Sadie had wanted to ask several follow-up questions, but she was also worried about upsetting Nina. She didn't want it to seem like she was getting close to her just for information because nothing could've been further from the truth.

But Sadie was curious. The whole thing was like an awkward puzzle.

"These cakes are lovely, Cecile. Truly. You are a tremendous baker," Darlene said. She was a woman of about sixty with tightly tied salt-and-pepper hair.

"Thank you. It was so nice to have an occasion to make such fine food. Usually, I only do so when my daughter comes to town with her husband."

"Where does your daughter live?" Sadie asked.

"She's two towns over in Buena Vista. It's a lovely little town, but hard

going. Not unlike here. I see her maybe two, three times a year.”

Sadie could sense the pain in her voice, and she wondered if Cecile ever felt lonely. Perhaps the quilting bee was just what she needed to cheer up.

“Well, we’re thrilled to be treated to such fine food, aren’t we ladies?” Sadie said, trying to rouse a bit of gratitude from the entire group.

Everyone readily agreed and began complimenting and flattering Cecile, and Cecile preened as though she was relishing it.

When the session drew to a close, Sadie thanked everyone for attending and then helped Cecile tidy the house with the help of Nina. They thanked her for once again hosting the quilting bee and then headed to their horses.

It was darker than usual, owing to the time of year. It was becoming late autumn, but luckily the fair Californian weather kept them comfortable.

“It’s such a change to be this cool and comfortable this time of year,” Sadie remarked.

“It took me a year or so to stop finding it novel. The people who grew up here have no idea what trudging through snow is like.”

Both women laughed and walked their horses slowly toward the trail that would lead to their ranches.

“How are things on the ranch, Nina?” Sadie asked.

“I have to be honest with you, they’re not good. I know I mentioned before that we’ve been struggling, but things just seem to get worse every week.”

“Did something happen?” Even though Sadie was supposed to have no regard for the Larabees, she couldn’t help but feel sympathy for her

friend, especially because the Fields ranch was seemingly not much better off.

“Whenever we think things are getting back on track, something happens that throws all our work out the door. It’s awfully frustrating, and I think Patrick is reaching the end of his rope.

“Some days he looks like he could cry, and I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“Oh, Nina, I’m sorry. That sounds awful. Did something happen this week?”

Nina nodded, but she looked a little reticent.

“You can tell me. You don’t have to, but just know I won’t be telling anyone,” Sadie assured her. “Not Ben, not anyone.”

“Some of our hens went missing once again. It happened not too long ago, but now there’s hardly any left.

“We used to have enough hens to make a good profit selling eggs, but now that there’s about three left, that just won’t be possible because we need to feed ourselves first.”

“That’s shocking,” Sadie said, taken aback. “Who would stoop to stealing hens out of someone’s coop? I mean, it sounds like something out of a children’s tale.”

Nina paused for a minute again, and Sadie could guess what she was about to say.

“The Fieldses, right? We could stoop to such a thing.”

“It’s not like that, Sadie. I don’t really believe that, but it’s what Patrick and his parents think. And they can’t be convinced otherwise.”

Sadie shook her head, but she wasn’t at all annoyed with Nina. It was

the situation.

“I know you don’t think that of me, Nina, but this whole thing has me baffled. We’ve lost cattle a few times, and fences have been destroyed throughout the property.

“It creates so much extra work, and we’re already struggling to get through all the daily work,” Sadie told her.

“It’s so bizarre. I’m almost starting to think it’s a force beyond our control. Perhaps we were meant to lose the ranch,” Nina said. She sounded defeated.

“Nina, you can’t think like that, otherwise you’ve already lost it all. Things will change. I’m not entirely sure how, but they will.”

The Larabee ranch came into sight, and Sadie knew she had to ride off ahead of Nina so they wouldn’t be spotted together.

“Listen, I know things are tough, but please don’t give up. You can tell me your troubles any time. We’re friends, after all.”

“You mean that?” Nina asked.

“Absolutely.”

The two women smiled at each other in the moonlight before Sadie urged her horse into a trot and took off toward the Fields ranch. She knew Nina would wait a good few minutes before riding on to her property, so she wanted to be as quick as possible.

What Nina had told her troubled Sadie, but she found it nearly impossible to believe any member of the Fields family would do such a thing.

Whenever they had discussed the details of the feud, they each had been adamant that they knew nothing of the problems the Larabees faced on their ranch. Instead, they accused the Larabees of making

things up to sully their name.

But Sadie was sure Nina's distress was real; she wasn't telling her of the ranch's problems to make the Fieldses sound bad. In fact, Nina seemed just as troubled and puzzled as Sadie was.

Ben had no time to do things like stealing hens in the middle of the night. And she didn't think the elder Fields' eyesight would have allowed him to do it even if he had wanted to.

And Harriet Fields? Sadie couldn't picture it.

It all seemed so absurd, but something was happening. Hens and cattle and other livestock were going missing, and property was being damaged. None of this was imagined.

The other thing weighing on Sadie's mind was Nina herself. She was a kind and conscientious person.

She had never shown an ounce of the character Sadie thought someone would need to have married into such an evil family. If Patrick really did such awful things, how could Nina stay with him?

The only answer was if everything the Larabees did was in secret, and Nina had no idea. But how could they keep up such a façade every single day?

It was all too bizarre for Sadie to understand. For the time being, she had to just accept that nothing added up, and do her best to support Ben and the ranch.

The situation wasn't good on the Fields ranch, and although it seemed like the Larabees had it worse, Sadie didn't want to act like they were somehow in the clear, as this wasn't the case.

If the family didn't catch up on the work and make some gains in profit, they could be looking at a dire situation. And Sadie hated that thought.

Not just because she had finally found a home and could lose it, but because everything the Fieldses worked for could dissolve before their eyes.

The next day, Sadie had a busy morning tending to the gardens with Harriet. After breakfast with Ben, she walked along happily to meet her mother-in-law at the south garden.

When she arrived, Harriet was already hard at work, donning a large bonnet to shield her face from the sun.

“That’s a lovely hat you’re wearing,” Sadie pointed out.

“Oh, this old thing? Just helps keep the sun out of my eyes. Do you have a hat, Sadie?”

Sadie had never really thought much about things like hats or parasols. They seemed like fashion accessories for well-to-do women—the type of woman Sadie was not.

She had never thought there might be some practical use beyond a big woolen winter hat.

“No, I don’t suppose I do,” she answered.

“Ah, well. We’ll have to put an order in before winter so one will arrive in time for spring. A good hat is essential to outdoor work.”

“I guess all the men do wear those large cowboy hats,” she added.

“Indeed, they do. Just a shame no proper lady should be caught dead in one of those.”

Sadie chuckled, then kneeled to work alongside Harriet. They had quite a lot of vegetables to harvest by hand. Beside Harriet sat several large baskets, ready to be filled.

The task would likely take most of the morning, and Sadie didn't mind at all. The work itself was fine, but sometimes she wondered if there might've been something even more pressing she should be doing.

The thing was that Ben wasn't often clear about what work was the most important to tackle. And she was sure he still thought she needed to be treated delicately, as though she wasn't quite up to speed and would make things harder, not easier.

She knew it would take time before Ben trusted her fully, but she really wanted him to at least give her a fair shot at things. Sadie was a fast learner and liked to just try to figure it out as she went, but Ben wasn't the same. He was thoughtful and he took his time.

By the time it was nearly noon, the two women had taken a large haul of autumn vegetables from several gardens.

Out of the vegetables they were keeping for themselves, Sadie had set about canning as many as she could back at the house so that vegetables would last through the winter.

It wasn't something she had ever done before, but after one session with Harriet, Sadie had no trouble with the process.

Working alongside Ben's mother was something Sadie was growing to love. Harriet was a patient woman, and she had a wealth of knowledge about managing a ranch home.

Sadie was trying to pick up as much as she could as quickly as she could, but she also knew these types of things took time. Such vast knowledge couldn't be built up with ease.

It would take years of hard work to get there, and Sadie was just happy to have the opportunity.

The other thing was that Harriet was nothing like Sadie's mother. It pained her to think about things in those terms, but it was just the truth.

Harriet had been lucky to have a long marriage and a large ranch home to tend to, but Sadie knew her mother had only complicated things for herself.

She could have chosen to stay in one place and build it up over time—make it into a true home. It was her choice not to, and while Sadie was learning to respect that, it wasn't the life she wanted for herself.

Sadie didn't think less of her mother for her choices, but sometimes she still got frustrated thinking about the life she was forced to live while growing up. It hadn't been easy, and it had subjected her to intense loneliness.

But it had also made her the person she was today, and for that Sadie was grateful. Perhaps she wouldn't have been able to appreciate life in Cottonwood Springs or be so outgoing to be able to organize the quilting bee if she had lived a different life.

Indeed, Sadie guessed she never would have made it to California, had things been different.

As she worked away in her own kitchen, Sadie had prepared about three cans of peppers before Ben burst through the door, breathless.

"Darn it, Sadie. The cattle have all run from their pasture."

"What?"

It was hard to believe what Ben was saying, but he was beside himself.

"I don't know what went on, but they escaped from the pasture where they were grazing, and we've been trying to round them up. I'm damn near exhausted, but we still haven't got them all. And Dad went and injured his leg trying to help."

Sadie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Oh gosh, is he okay?"

"I think he'll be fine, but he's no help for the time being." Ben was huffing and puffing as he braced himself against the back of a chair. "I don't know what I'm going to do."

This was one of those moments Sadie wished Ben would have thought to trust her, but she knew trust was something built up over time, especially with someone as sensitive as Ben.

So, she put her vanity aside and asked herself. "Can I help? I can ride out with you."

Ben stared at her for a minute, and Sadie wasn't sure what he was going to say. She wanted to help as best she could; there was no way Ben could solve the problem on his own, but she had no idea if he would let her help or if his pride would get in the way.

"I don't know, Sadie..." He trailed off.

"I know I haven't spent much time riding, but I'm getting better, honestly. I even gallop a portion of the way each time I head back from the bee. It's gotta be better than nothing, having me by your side out there."

Ben nodded, and it seemed she'd won him over. "Put on something that can get dirty and meet me out front. This won't be pretty, Sadie."

"That'll make it all the more fun."

Sadie laughed as he shook his head. She liked flustering him a bit.



Soon, Sadie was galloping on horseback out to the pasture that should've been housing the cattle. She was wearing an old dress and she'd stuck long johns under with a pair of boots so she'd be covered, head to toe.

They slowed when they neared a smattering of cattle all over the corral, and Sadie could already see how difficult the task would be.

“Right, we need to get all of them there back over in there, you see it?” Ben shouted.

“Got it, but what should I do? Ride around them?”

“First we’ll ride around ’em till they’re close enough to the fence, then we’ll get on foot and push ’em around ourselves.”

“What?”

“Don’t be worried. They’re not fierce in the least,” Ben yelled with a laugh.

Sadie liked seeing this side of Ben. He was lively and in his element, and she could see he was a true cowboy.

My husband is a cowboy. It certainly had a nice ring to it, and Sadie was wholly distracted for a moment as she blushed over her thoughts.

The two brought their horses back to a trot and started looping circles around the cattle, forcing them ever closer to the enclosure. It wasn’t easy, and Sadie thought she might feel dizzy going in circles and changing direction so quickly, but she did it.

She was able to find her way with the reins and the horse, and she felt rather proud of herself. Once all the cattle were loitering near the fence, Ben jumped off his horse and Sadie followed suit.

“Get in, that’s it. Get in there,” he called, pushing a large cow back into the disclosure.

He was also standing in half a foot of mud, and Sadie suddenly realized how he ended up so dirty now and then. Now it was her turn.

As she ran after the cattle, she found herself slipping and sliding in the

mud, and soon her legs, the bottom of her dress, and her hands were covered with mud.

It was a little cool and wet, but Sadie figured it could've been much worse.

"This way, Sadie," Ben called. "No, this way!" He was yelling and laughing, which was a welcome sight.

Even though she was struggling at times, Sadie was enjoying herself, and she could see that her presence had relieved the look of worry that had darkened Ben's eyes when he'd returned to the house in a panic.

"Get in there. That's it. Go to your home," she said, giggling.

While she was launching another push at the cow, it suddenly ran back into its pasture and she fell straight into the mud, only just saving her face from being covered in mud.

"Come on, Sadie, let's keep going."

She pulled herself up and just kept trying. It wasn't easy work, and she was sure her arms would be aching for days afterward, but it was thrilling.

Sadie had never done something so intensive. It was as though she was using every muscle in her body at once.

Even though Sadie knew she wasn't the most helpful to Ben, and he had to keep correcting her and instructing her, there was no frustration. He didn't seem angry or annoyed, and she was just having fun even though it was supposed to be work.

Before she knew it, nearly all the cattle were back in their enclosure.

"Let's get back on the horses and get those last two in. Should be able to get them if we work 'em together."

“Got it!” Sadie called.

She pulled herself up onto the horse with force and huffed as she landed in the saddle. And she even caught Ben looking a little impressed, but she didn’t let it go to her head.

They walked behind the remaining cattle and forced them back into the pasture with ease. Once they were all inside, Ben locked the gate that had been wide open.

Sadie wasn’t sure what had happened, but she didn’t want to focus on any mistakes that were made. What was important was that the cattle were back where they should be, and Ben could get on with his day.

“That’s it! We did it, Sadie!” Ben called out. He was excited and relieved, and it brought her such happiness she couldn’t help cheering and waving her hands around as she jiggled in the saddle.

It was a miscalculation, however, as the next thing Sadie knew, she was slipping off the saddle, and she couldn’t grab ahold of anything to break her fall. She called out in fright as she went down.

“Sadie, my god!” she heard Ben call to her. His quick footsteps squelching in the mud were all she could hear before she saw him staring down at her with wide eyes full of fright.

She was perfectly fine, though; she was resting in a giant puddle of mud.

“Oh, Sadie. You’re a mess,” he said. He scooped her up with both hands despite the mud that now soaked her entire outfit, and Sadie couldn’t help giggling.

Suddenly, she was encased in his warm arms and staring into his eyes.

“I’m your mess,” Sadie said, feeling a little playful.

Then, Ben kissed her. Their lips pressed together lightly, and

butterflies took flight throughout her body.

Sadie even felt her knees go a little weak, but she quickly steadied herself by grabbing onto his muscular arms.

As they withdrew from the kiss, their eyes found each other once again, and Sadie felt so comfortable in his gaze.

It felt like home, like everything she'd ever dreamed of... and it felt like love.

After their kiss, Ben made sure Sadie was okay to walk as he led them back toward the pasture, wanting to make sure the gate was securely shut. He also wanted to carry out a quick count to make sure all the cattle were accounted for.

He didn't think the cattle had time to stray too far, but it wasn't unheard of.

If the gate had been left open for hours, then there was no telling where some cattle might have got to. They could've made it up to the house by now.

The cattle had last slipped past the gate months ago when Peter was still alive and working the ranch in good health. He hadn't even called into the house to report the problem; instead, he had worked tirelessly for a few hours to get every last head back where they were meant to be.

The only reason they had known the cattle got out was because Eli was riding by as Peter pushed the last cow past the gate.

As the story was recounted to Ben, both told that Peter had just smiled and waved as he heaved himself into the cow to get it to move. And Eli had just chuckled at his gumption.

His father hadn't needed to stop and help, which made Ben feel some guilt considering his father was now resting with a leg injury. But there was no point dwelling on how things used to be; he was here in

the present in a dire situation.

Ben wasn't sure what happened to the gate. It was clearly left open, but he had no recollection of doing so.

But, if it was an accident, he probably wouldn't remember having made the mistake. It could've been his father, or it could have been his own doing from the night before.

Perhaps he didn't securely lock the gate, and the cattle naturally found their way out. There was no way to know what happened, so Ben didn't want to focus on that part too much.

What mattered most was ensuring all the cattle were back where they were supposed to be. Mistakes were always going to happen.

As Ben stood counting the heads of his cattle, his gut started to sink. There were a few missing, and all the stress Ben had stamped out as he corralled the cattle with Sadie came back twofold.

"Aw, nuts. We're not done here. Some of 'em are missing."

"Oh no," Sadie said.

This was the last thing Ben needed. Their cattle had been rustled twice in recent times, so the idea that he had lost some through his own doing almost made him nauseous.

They had a hard enough time dealing with the Larabees' sabotage without having to recover from their own mistakes and incompetence. Ben was annoyed now and beginning to feel annoyed at himself as he doubted his own actions.

Had he left the gate unlocked? Was this all his fault?

Trying to refocus himself, he started scanning the property. Ben was shielding his eyes from the sun and glancing around, hoping to catch sight of the missing cattle.

The sun was terribly bright at this time of day and his hat would only cover so much. When he glanced across the river, his anger fired up. The cattle were on the Larabees' ranch.

"Of all the low-down, dirty things..."

"Ben, what is it?"

"The cattle are on the Larabees' property. Figures. Can't trust those Larabees for even a minute. They'll steal from you even when the sun is shining."

Ben was so angry he wanted to shout and curse, but he didn't dare in Sadie's company. Still, he knew he wasn't covering his anger much regardless.

It didn't matter; now she was seeing what the Larabees were like once again. He was sure she'd be just as mad as he was.

No matter what went wrong on their ranch, it always tied back to the Larabees, and Ben was tired of it. Just a minute ago he had been doubting himself and ready to take the blame, when it seemed this incident was yet again perpetrated by their neighbors.

Ben didn't understand why they did stuff like this—just causing trouble and general nuisance.

They must have found it amusing to see him and his family flustered and frantic, and Ben hated that. He hated the idea that he was providing some sort of entertainment for those people.

"Where are you going?" Sadie called as Ben hopped on his horse and started off toward the neighboring ranch.

"Gonna get back what's ours."

Ben tried to avoid the Larabees' property at all costs. He didn't even like looking in the direction of their ranch, but there was no avoiding

it now.

Ben didn't know what their intentions were with the cattle, either. Did they let them free just to cause some chaos and throw Ben's day off-schedule, or were they trying to steal the cattle in broad daylight?

The latter at first seemed crazy, but the more he thought about it, the more he was convinced that the Larabees would do such a bold thing.

As he waded through the river and onto the Larabee ranch, he heard Sadie following behind him. He was sure she must be getting angry too, considering they'd sabotaged the farm right in the middle of the work day.

How could they think they'd get away with it?

"Ben, wait. Just wait one moment," Sadie was calling.

Ben stalled the horse and turned back to her.

"I don't understand why you're so mad."

Ben huffed, feeling annoyed by her question. He didn't expect her to ask something so apparent, and he was shocked that she didn't feel the same way. "Isn't it a bit obvious?"

"It's not. The cattle found their way over there. It's a pain, but it's hardly something to be so mad about."

"Sadie, the cattle didn't just get there magically. Clearly, the Larabees engineered this whole situation to make us sweat.

"They probably thought they could get away with taking the cattle if they wandered far enough onto their property." Ben was shaking his head at the thought.

The Larabees really were something else.

“Ben, the cattle got out because the gate wasn’t locked. How is that the Larabees’ fault?”

He stopped again and turned to Sadie, now huffing again in anger. He didn’t get why she was disagreeing with him when it was all so obvious.

“We don’t know what happened, and for all we know they came and unlocked the gate on us. Can never be too sure with these tricky Larabees,” Ben huffed at Sadie.

He wasn’t sure why he needed to explain this to her, given everything that had happened. She knew what they were like, so why was she questioning it all?

Ben led them toward the cattle that had begun grazing on the Larabees’ land. As they neared the cattle, two figures on horseback came into view.

They were riding slowly and close to one another side by side. Soon, Sadie and Ben were met by none other than Patrick and Nina Larabee.

It seemed they were out riding around the property together alone.

“Hey, what’s this now? What do you think you’re doing on our property? Getting ready to steal something in the middle of the day? Is that how daring you’ve become, Fields?” Patrick said snidely.

“Well, that’s a little rich, don’t you think? When you’re the one stealing at high noon,” Ben called out. “You’re the thief.”

“Ben, that’s a little harsh. Shouldn’t we just get what we came for?” Sadie called out.

He was shocked to hear Sadie trying to temper his anger like that. He knew she had no problem butting in, and he usually didn’t mind it, but he needed her on his side.

“You’re calling me a thief? You got some nerve, Fields. This here’s our property, and you’re the ones trespassing,” Patrick retorted.

“Patrick, we don’t even know why they’re here. Let’s not start making accusations,” his wife reasoned.

“Nina, now is not the time to be equitable. These people can’t be trusted.”

“Sounds like you’re talking about yourself, Larabee,” Ben called. He was getting angrier as the minutes went on.

“You have a lot of nerve coming onto this property and accusing us of stealing yet again. I’ve had just about enough of your accusations, too.

“You know I can go to the marshal and tell them you’re causing a nuisance, making things up about my family? Might just land you in that little cell of his for a night.”

“Hey, this is all a bit much. We don’t even know why they came here. Patrick, let’s just calm down,” Nina said.

“Maybe if we explained, things would be clearer,” Sadie added.

Ben looked at Patrick. It was obvious they were both perturbed their wives were interjecting themselves into the conflict, but neither was about to back down.

And the whole situation was only aggravating Ben all the more.

“This is what happened,” Sadie started. “We had an incident with our cattle. It seems the gate was left open, and the cattle got out.

“We had to corral them back into their grazing pasture, and well, that’s why I’m covered in mud head to toe.” She laughed.

Ben did not know why she was wasting her breath explaining what happened on their ranch to the Larabees. Not only were they

undeserving of the courtesy, he also didn't want them knowing their business.

He didn't like the idea of Sadie telling them about the goings-on because it would just give them more to use against them, especially when she made it look like they were admitting fault or incompetent at taking care of their own livestock.

Plus, he was a little embarrassed the cattle had gotten out in the first place, regardless of how it happened.

"Sadie, that's enough," he tried.

But she just ignored him and kept explaining.

"Once they were all back where they should've been, Ben noticed some were missing. We were only over here to collect our cattle.

"And really, we should probably apologize to you for the inconvenience. Our cattle are just doing as they please in your pasture."

Sadie laughed and even smiled while she spoke, and Ben was shocked. He'd never expected her to treat the Larabees like respectable neighbors, and the very act felt a little insulting.

Hearing that much was all Ben could take, so he stormed off toward the cattle, pushing his horse to a trot.

He hated that Sadie had spoken to them so rationally and calmly, and even apologized. It was ludicrous. A Fields never apologized to a Larabee, whether at fault or not. It didn't matter.

Sadie needed to understand the truth of things, and fast, as far as he was concerned.

Once Ben reached the cattle, he hollered at and circled them as fast as he could, trying to push them back toward the river. It was hard to do

as one person, but he wasn't about to call out to Sadie.

He'd handled his fair share of messes on his own long before she arrived. Sure, maybe he couldn't do things as well or as fast as Peter did, but Ben didn't give up either.

Sadie remained with the Larabees for a minute, and Ben couldn't help sneaking glances as he began to move the cattle toward the river. It looked like she was still trying to explain things to them as she was talking with her hands, but suddenly Ben heard Patrick.

He yelled in a gruff voice for her to get the cattle and get off their property. Ben didn't like that Patrick had spoken to her like that, but he was certain Sadie must now understand there was no reasoning with people like the Larabees. They were just bad apples.

In a rush and looking a little embarrassed, Sadie joined him to herd the cattle back across the river. He didn't need to instruct her now; she had picked up the process well.

And Ben was glad for that because he didn't want to speak a word to her.

He just hoped that the experience on the Larabees' ranch was enough to show her how things really were—in the future, she wouldn't pay them any undue courtesies.

The ride back to their home was silent save for the horses neighing and sloshing through the mud and beating their hooves against sparse grass that gave way to sand and dirt.

Ben was livid, but he was trying to calm down so that by the time they reached the house, he could speak his mind clearly. He wasn't entirely sure what he'd just witnessed on the Larabees' property, but it wasn't what he expected.

Sadie had no problem butting into any conversation, and Ben really had no problem with that. In fact, he rather liked her willingness to join in and make herself heard.

Her outgoing nature and her fearlessness were two things that Ben admired about Sadie. But what happened on the Larabee ranch was different.

She had used her strengths in all the wrong ways and most likely made the situation worse.

As she spoke, laughing and smiling, it almost sounded like she was taking Larabee's side. Ben didn't really believe that could be true, but that was what it felt like to him.

It wasn't a betrayal, but it almost felt like one. And Ben hated that.

He needed to know that Sadie would always be on his side—his family's side—and that she would always have his back. Loyalty

meant ever so much to him.

No one had ever questioned the Larabees to him like she had except for the marshal, and that point wasn't lost on Ben, either. She had sounded a lot like the lawman—incredibly skeptical and looking for excuses when there were years of incidents that clearly pointed to a pattern.

Maybe it was because Sadie was still so new in town. And she was an optimist; that was another thing he liked, and it reminded him of Peter.

But Peter had never doubted the Larabees' wrongdoing.

In all the years Peter had gone head to head with the Larabees, he never so much as questioned any of it. And he was often the one to field the accusations, too.

He'd visited the marshal several times, and even though it never went anywhere, Peter was happy to do so. He'd always say, "At least they can't say we didn't tell them."

Peter was so sure the Larabees' exploits would be exposed one day, and Ben wanted to do that almost for him, too, so all of Peter's good work wasn't for nothing.

But as much as his angry mind was fluttering through memories, it couldn't help him rationalize what had just happened with Sadie. It wasn't that she had behaved like a different person, but as though she had lost her loyalty to the family entirely.

Why Nina Larabee almost seemed to be acting the same was beyond him, but he could tell it had disturbed Patrick as much as it disturbed him.

Ben didn't want their wives involved in the conflict, anyway. It was hard enough seeing how the feud had taken hold over his mother and made her vacillate between anger and sadness much of the time.

He didn't want Sadie to become jaded and exasperated like that. Sadie was so cheerful and pleasant; if she lost that, Ben would never forgive himself.

But at the same time, she needed to know when to back off, it seemed.

After a brisk trot home where Ben didn't so much as look at Sadie, they dismounted their horses in tandem and Ben took the reins of both without saying a thing. He hitched them to the house and then stood for a minute with his hands on his hips.

Sadie ran into the house quickly, and he had no doubt she was itching to get out of her muddied clothes. Ben took a minute to rinse off his boots in the water barrel they kept at the side of the house, then sat on the porch for a couple of minutes.

He was still angry, and because he knew he had to have a difficult conversation with Sadie, Ben waited until he felt some clarity return.

When he finally went inside, Sadie was in the kitchen, drinking a jar of water and looking at him with wide eyes.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, suddenly uncertain as to whether his anger had really dissipated. "He called me a thief and a liar, and you just tried to make nice with him."

"I wasn't trying to make nice, Ben. I just didn't see the point of arguing there."

"Arguing where, on Larabee's property?"

"Yes. It seemed a bit unnecessary to me. And we clearly interrupted time the couple was spending alone."

Ben huffed. "And why should we care whether or not we interrupt them?"

"Because they're a young married couple, just like us."

“Sadie, they’re not like us. They’re Larabees,” Ben nearly yelled.

Sadie was talking as though they had run into a nice young couple out on a romantic horseback ride, when really they had confronted the neighbors that were likely stealing their cattle, among other things.

“They’re still people. Or are they not?” Now Sadie had her hands on her hips.

“They’re people, all right—the kind who have no shame and steal in the middle of the day. Is that the kind of people you want to make nice with?”

Sadie was shaking her head, and Ben could just tell the conversation was far from over. It seemed Patrick’s rough dismissal of her from the Larabee property had made no dent in her philosophy toward them.

“Larabee also accused you of stealing. Don’t you see how bizarre it all is? Why not just have a civil discussion?”

“Why would I have a civil discussion with someone who accused me of stealing?”

Sadie cradled her head in the palm of her hand, and Ben knew why she was frustrated. In any other circumstance, he would understand how crazy it all sounded.

They both had accused one another, though, and in fairness, Larabee had cast the first stone. Nonetheless, Ben knew this situation was different. The Larabees were slippery folk.

They couldn’t be reasoned with, nor could they be trusted. And maybe Sadie just needed to see more of their wicked ways with her own eyes before she understood.

“Sadie, there’s just a lot you don’t know. The Larabees have been coming after us for years now. Years. And they love to make our lives difficult.

“Can’t you see that it makes for a tough situation?” he said, hoping to get through to her. “We can’t just treat them like normal neighbors.”

He could tell Sadie was thinking over his words intently.

“It just all seemed so unnecessary,” she said, finally. “Our cattle got out because of our own negligence. It wasn’t any fault of the Larabees.

“All we needed to do was explain that we were there to take them back and be on our merry way. It didn’t need to be an argument.

“If you had done less name-calling and more talking, it wouldn’t have taken half as long to get the cattle back,” she added.

Trying to subdue his anger and frustration, Ben folded his arms and stared at the ceiling for a minute. Sadie hadn’t listened to a word he said.

Somehow, she was still trying to act like the Larabees were just some normal, innocent neighbors who hadn’t spent their days and nights making life for his family hellish.

“It feels like you’re brushing off everything that’s happened, Sadie, and everything I just said. Nothing is ever as it appears with them. We can’t just treat them like everyone else.”

“I’m not ignoring anything that happened. But I am focusing on what happened *today*.”

“Everything that happens is just another incident in the long saga of the Larabees making our lives increasingly grim. You can’t ignore what happened before. It’s all connected.”

“Do you hear yourself, Ben? I’m not ignoring anything, but this feud is starting to sound like an obsession.”

Ben didn’t know what she meant. He was trying to protect his family as best he could, yet Sadie just didn’t seem to be on the same page

anymore. It was a little disheartening.

“There’s no obsession. Just years of hardship. Not sure why you can’t see that. The Larabees are the ones in the wrong. It’ll never be the other way round.”

“Oh, Ben,” Sadie said. She sounded exasperated, and that frustrated him further. “I’m not interested in who is in the wrong, or who is ‘more right’—I just want to be happy.

“And being embroiled in a feud isn’t exactly the ideal situation.”

So that was it. Sadie was saying she wasn’t happy, and it was all because of the Larabees.

Ben felt livid again, so instead of carrying on arguing and saying something he would regret, he looked at her and then left.

He cared about Sadie; he didn’t want to hurt her. But right now, it felt like she didn’t care about him or his family.

She had spent so much time talking about how family was the most important thing to her, and yet now it didn’t seem that way at all. It seemed like she wanted to make nice with as many people as possible, even if it hurt her family.

Ben kicked the dirt beside his horse before hopping on into the saddle. There were mountains of work left to do that day, but he just needed to be away from the house and away from Sadie.

That night, Ben had trouble falling asleep. The two hadn't spoken much for the remainder of the day before, but he'd been careful not to go to sleep angry or feeling like things were unsaid.

They had both apologized before bed, and he had kissed her cheek. Even though they didn't see eye to eye on things just yet, the two had agreed to put their quarrel aside for the time being.

He hadn't had the heart to tell her that her actions had made him feel like she didn't care. It was partly because he knew deep down that she did care, but her actions had still hurt him.

But Ben was glad to call a truce, even if it proved to be short-lived. He didn't want to bury any problems that cropped up between them.

He knew they would fester and cause more issues in their marriage, but he also knew enough to have patience. While he couldn't be the optimist of the relationship, he could be pragmatic.

Once he was finally asleep, he slept deeply and dreamlessly. Yet, sometime in the early hours of the morning, when the sun was barely above the horizon, Ben awoke from a deep sleep in the same fashion he had so many times growing up.

Loud, angry voices filled the house, and it was as though he was just a boy again, cowering in his bed. Ben could feel the stress permeating every part of his body.

Since he'd moved in with Sadie, he hadn't experienced this. The mornings were becoming so special—they were peaceful and just for him and Sadie.

But that little safety net he had built for himself was now torn to shreds.

Quickly dressing, he headed out to the hall to find Sadie just as alarmed and perplexed as he was. Down in the kitchen, the ruckus was caused by Ben's parents yelling frantically, both at each other and to him and Sadie.

Ben couldn't understand why they had needed to bring their carnival to his house. The only thing he could think was that something truly awful had happened with the Larabees.

"What's happened?" he called from the stairs.

"The cattle. They been rustled again," Eli said. "We lost too many heads. What on earth are we gonna do now?"

"Eli, we can't just stand here and moan. We know who's behind it and we have to do something, once and for all," Harriet yelled back at him.

She only ever seemed to achieve this level of irate with the Larabees and his father. Ben stole a glance at Sadie, wanting to make sure she wasn't upset by his parents' behavior.

Though she didn't look pleased, she didn't look frightful either, which was a relief.

"Them damn Larabees just never give up. They want to see us destitute. I just know it," Eli returned.

"How many are gone, Pa?" Ben asked.

"Easier to tell you how many's left. We got about five heads."

“Jeez, Pa. This is bad.”

Five heads wasn't much to do anything with. And Ben couldn't fathom how someone had sneaked onto the property and stolen away with so many cattle.

Rather fleetingly, he hoped maybe there was a problem with the gate and the cattle had managed to free themselves.

“You sure they were rustled?” he asked.

“What kinda question is that? What d'ya take me for, a fool? Lock on the gate was busted to smithereens. No cattle I know of could do that without breaking down the entire fence.”

His father was right; someone had purposely broken into the corral and rustled the cattle away. Ben didn't know whether to despair or curse.

The Larabees were truly wicked people. This he was certain of now.

“What the heck will we do? We can't survive this, son,” Eli called out, almost as if he was asking the heavens for an answer.

Ben's heart broke at the words. With every attack and mishap engineered by the Larabees, it had felt like someone was removing the foundation of their home.

Eventually, Ben knew, the last piece would be removed and the entire house would tumble in on itself, leaving nothing but rubble.

Ben didn't want today to be that day, but he wasn't sure what to do. He couldn't magic up more cattle. It would take time and money he didn't have.

“It might be better to take stock at this point. Look at what we can get for what's left here, and then think about moving on. And going into some other line of business.

“It’s not what I want to do, or your mother, but we hardly got a choice. Damn them,” Eli said, ending in a shout.

Those were words Ben had never wanted to hear, but he knew his father was just being practical given the situation. If something wasn’t done to get the cattle back, staying on the ranch was a losing proposition.

And Ben knew Eli wouldn’t stand around and let the family get into a desperate situation.

Seeing his father so defeated and contemplating the unthinkable left Ben bereft. He couldn’t help but think that the incident with Sadie the day before had played some role in all of this.

She had wanted to play nice, but clearly that wasn’t received well.

Patrick had just shouted her off his land in the end. Perhaps he’d had enough and thought now was the time to get rid of the Fieldses once and for all.

It made Ben furious. He should have known better than to allow Sadie to get involved in this conflict. It wasn’t that he blamed her, but the whole thing was a mess.

Ben had no idea how to fix things or if he could fix things. If he couldn’t fix things, Ben would work tirelessly with his father to ensure the family had the means to start over somewhere else, but he didn’t want that—not for his parents and not for Sadie.

There had to be a way, but how?

Peter would’ve known what to do. Peter would’ve looked his father in the eye and said, “Don’t worry, Pa, I got this.”

And his parents would have trusted him wholeheartedly, never doubting his ability to save the day. But Ben couldn’t do that.

He had no idea what to do, or how to do, or to make it look convincing that he did.

The longer he thought everything over as he watched his parents vacillate between yelling angrily and commiserating over the end of their life's work, the more Ben felt his heart pounding. There would be no other time, no other opportunity... this was it.

He had to act now, or everything would be lost.

Ben walked to the door and put his Stetson on, and everyone quieted.

"Where you goin' son?" his pa asked.

"I'm gonna visit with every seller in this here town and the neighboring towns. I doubt the Larabees would've kept the cattle on their land because the marshal would be sure to find them if we had convinced him to come out and look around.

"They've sold them on," Ben said, "which means someone's got 'em—and I'm gonna find 'em."

As he spoke, his confidence grew. Ben felt certain this was the only plan of action that would lead to a result.

The cattle couldn't have disappeared, and the Larabees wouldn't be stupid enough to keep them, especially not after yesterday.

After he nodded to the family and gave Sadie a knowing look, he left the house and started toward his horse. Looking at the empty field in front of him, Ben felt his anger rise.

This was his home, his livelihood, that of his parents and his wife. The Larabees were playing with fire, trying to burn the Fieldses' entire lives away.

Ben wasn't about to lie down and let it happen. He had to fight so that even if he lost, and they lost everything, at least he knew he tried.

And tried his hardest.

It wouldn't play out like it would if it were Peter leading the charge. Ben knew that, and as much as it played on his mind, wondering just what his parents would think and whether they would trust him, he had to put it aside and learn to trust his own instincts.

Even if he failed, he had to try and he had to follow his own plan. No one was going to hand him the answer, and he'd lived on this ranch his whole life, too.

Maybe he couldn't come up with the ideas that Peter would have, but he could come up with something different. And maybe he wouldn't have his brother's cheerful disposition, but it didn't matter. He just needed to do things his own way.

No more waiting. No more watching.

Only time to act.

Sadie spent most of the day consumed by anxiety alongside

Harriet. Despite the terrible situation they found themselves in on the farm, there was work to be done, and they had to carry on as though everything was fine.

She had tried her best to bring a bit of warmth and distraction to her and Harriet's day, but she hadn't been overly successful.

Every time she tried to make light of something or move their conversation away from the Larabees and doom and gloom, Harriet had blanked and then just restarted the conversation where it was before.

Sadie understood that Harriet must have been feeling an immense sadness at the idea of losing so much. And Sadie couldn't help but think of Peter and how the family had lost him less than a year ago.

The home and the property must be steeped in so many memories of him, and she was sure Harriet must have hated the idea of losing it. It would be like losing her son all over.

"I'm sorry," Sadie said, holding out a hand to Harriet as they sat harvesting squash.

"Whatever do you have to be sorry for, my dear?" Harriet seemed wistful, and Sadie didn't want to make things worse.

"Just that this is all happening. But I trust in Ben. He's going to come

back with something—some information, or even the cattle themselves. I just know it.”

“Well, you know better than I. Ben’s always had a difficult time, but I’m hoping against all odds that there is some miracle that pulls us through this.”

Harriet squeezed her hand, and Sadie tried to smile. She didn’t like what Harriet had said about Ben, but she also didn’t want to prod in case what she said upset or angered her.

Sadie hated to think that Ben’s family had no faith in him, even though it might explain his lack of confidence.

The day wore on, and Sadie readied herself for the quilting bee. It was scheduled for Gladys’ house in one hour’s time, but Sadie was unable to look forward to it.

Nina would be there, and Sadie knew what she had to do. She had to confront her in a matter-of-fact way, even if it damaged their friendship.

Sadie hoped it wouldn’t, and she hoped Nina would understand why she had to ask, even if Nina had no knowledge or nothing helpful to say.

When Sadie arrived at the bee, she was pleased to see she was the last to arrive and everyone had already started sewing and chatting.

Gladys had set out plates of food for the attendees to help themselves to and she even had a bottle of bourbon on the table with fine glasses for those who might wish to have a drink.

It was a little unusual, but Sadie liked it. It felt fitting for the West.

“Gladys, I had no idea you were a bourbon drinker,” Cecile exclaimed after noticing the bottle.

“My late husband was from Tennessee—a bourbon man, through and through. Old habits are hard to shake, but we’re away from prying eyes here, so please. Drink up.”

Sadie smiled as she sat next to Nina. She wasn’t great at hiding things because when she knew something had to be done, she just wanted to do it and get it over with.

But Sadie had to pick her moment. She didn’t want to spoil the bee within the first hour if she and Nina ended up fighting.

After two hours passed and she was talked into just a sip of bourbon and some fine smoked fish, Sadie finally thought it was time to speak with Nina. She quietly asked her to meet her in the kitchen, and then waited for her.

“Sadie, what is it?” Nina asked.

“I have to ask you something, Nina, and I’m sorry that I do, but it’s really important.”

“Oh goodness, you’re scaring me just a bit.”

“Did the Larabees rustle our cattle last night? This morning, nearly all the cattle were gone. We only had five heads left.”

Sadie waited for her reaction, but when she saw Nina’s shock turn to sadness, she began to worry. Soon, Nina was tearful and struggling to speak.

“Nina, what is it? My goodness, you can tell me whatever it is. I’m sure you had nothing to do with what happened, even if your family did.”

“It’s not that,” Nina returned. She was wiping her eyes as best she could. “Our cattle was rustled last night, too. We have no idea how the ranch will survive. We were left with three heads. That, and the missing hens and all the rest—we’ve been left with nothing.”

Nina was nearly sobbing as she finished, so Sadie took her in her arms for a moment. She held Nina in a tight hug as she began to think about how peculiar this all was.

“Does everyone think it was the Fieldses who rustled the cattle?”

“Of course they do. No matter what happens, they always blame it on the Fieldses. It’s absurd.”

Suddenly, a little piece of the puzzle fell into place. The entire time since she’d learned of the feud, it had perplexed Sadie.

Each time the stories were recounted of the dastardly things the Larabees did, Sadie had felt skeptical. It all seemed rather convenient to blame it on them when there could have been multiple explanations for these occurrences.

But then when she considered how the stories duplicated—how it seemed the Fieldses and the Larabees were accusing each other of the exact same deeds often on the same day, it had all made even less sense.

Each family thought the other was throwing back an accusation to cover themselves, when in fact the same deeds were being carried out on both ranches often on the same exact dates.

That was no coincidence, and the more Sadie considered it, the more she believed that there was another party involved with whatever was going on. And whoever this party was, they were counting on the fact that the two families would never be civil with one another.

It meant they would never share stories or compare notes, because if they did, they would discover that they weren’t each other’s enemies, but victims of the same third party.

“Nina, my gosh. Have you ever considered that maybe there is another actor in all of this? That perhaps someone has been playing both sides, making the families suspect one another instead of them?”

The color returned to Nina's face as she nodded, looking somewhat relieved. "I've suspected this for quite some time, Sadie. But no one would ever listen to me.

"I tried to tell all the Larabees once, but I was shouted at until I agreed to never bring it up again. And when I spoke to Patrick alone about it, on each occasion he just would fly into a rage, telling me I didn't know what I was talking about, or that I was taking *their* side.

"It's all made me feel so crazy," she confessed.

Although it hurt to hear what Nina had been through, Sadie was also not surprised. Nina had been here much longer than Sadie, and she couldn't imagine what it must've been like having no one listen to her for so long.

"I had my first taste of that yesterday after we bumped into you on your property. I think Ben's probably still mad at me, even though we agreed to move past it for the time being."

"I'm sorry, Sadie. Patrick was truly awful to you yesterday when you were nothing but kind to him. I was so embarrassed."

Sadie took her hands in hers and squeezed them warmly.

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about. And we're going to solve this riddle before it's too late. Then, we'll never have to hear about this ludicrous feud ever again."

"But what can we do?" Nina asked.

Without missing a beat, Sadie smiled and said, "We're going to investigate and find out who's behind this all for ourselves.

"Since no one will listen to us without some sort of proof, we'll need to find that. And then we'll have to hope that our families will listen.

"And if they don't, well, we might have to go straight to the marshal,"

Sadie finished. “But we’ll deal with that when and if it happens.”

“I just pray they’ll listen to us,” Nina said. Sadie could sense how sincere she was, and she felt the same.

“We must pray that we can figure out who’s behind all these incidents before it really is too late. Eli Fields is already talking about selling the entire ranch if we can’t get the cattle back.”

Sadie had hated hearing him talk of selling everything off, though she understood it was the smartest option. If they waited too long and became too desperate, they could end up taking a bad deal just to end up with something.

Word would get around fast, too, bringing undesirables who laid in wait for just such opportunities. But Sadie had faith things wouldn’t progress that far.

Ben was off trying to bring home the cattle, and she knew his thoroughness and seriousness made it likely he would be successful. The rest would be up to her and Nina—and there was nothing Sadie wanted more than to triumphantly end the feud and save both ranches.

She wouldn’t stop until she had.

After speaking with Nina, Sadie made up an excuse to leave the quilting bee early. She didn't want to show how perturbed she was, so she plastered on the best smile she could and pretended she had forgotten about an important prior engagement.

None of the attendees doubted her, and she was shocked when a few said they were sorry to see her leave so early. It was a tiny bit of familiarity—they had expected her to be there till the end. And Sadie liked it.

Setting out on her horse, she rode down the thoroughfare at a gallop, no longer caring if anyone noticed her urgency. She followed the trail that led north, where she knew Ben would be calling on ranchers, looking for the lost cattle.

Not being overly familiar with the area or the names of the ranchers, Sadie decided to check each systematically until she found him.

She couldn't guess how Ben would take her news. There was a chance he wouldn't listen at all, or he would get angry, but she had to take that chance.

She had faith that at some point, Ben would listen to reason.

The first ranch she rode onto was small in comparison to the Fields and Larabee ranches. A humble home sat beside a small pasture with a meager number of cattle.

There was a small field of crops behind the house too, but not much else.

As Sadie rode toward the home, a man and his wife stepped onto the porch. She couldn't help noticing the man had his hand on his holster.

"Has Ben Fields been by your ranch?" Sadie called out. She thought it best to be straight to the point.

"Now, what's this all about?" the man called out. "We been bothered already by one Ben Fields. State your purpose."

Sadie halted her horse but didn't dismount in case she needed to make a quick exit. All the stories she had read about the lawless, wild west were streaming back to her.

It seemed as many misunderstandings were solved with a gun as words.

"My husband is Ben Fields. I'm just looking for him, that's all. You say he was at your ranch? How long ago?"

The man softened and moved his hand from his holster. "Was just about half an hour ago he came through here. Something about missing cattle. We don't have no missing cattle."

Sadie nodded, knowing she and Ben had troubled the rancher. She wasn't sure if in Ben's state he had maybe said too much or made it seem like he was suspicious.

It irked her that a fake feud was causing this kind of unpleasantness in the community.

She had known the whole time that a feud like that never affected just the families involved; there were always ripple effects. And now she was seeing it for herself.

"I'm so sorry to have bothered you. I must find him immediately, so

I'll be on my way."

The man eyed her as she began to turn her horse. She was about to bring it to a trot when he spoke.

"There's three more ranches 'round here. One is a little off the path. You'll see a little clearing on the right. Doesn't look much like a trail but it will lead you to the Smiths' ranch."

That little kindness made Sadie smile. She thanked him and then rode off, feeling a little hopeful.

Sadie rode back down the trail, trying to guess how far Ben could have gone in half an hour. Taking a risk, she skipped the first ranch that she came across and rode toward the next one.

As fields of crops came into view, Sadie slowed her horse, not wanting to gallop onto the rancher's property and cause more of a stir than she already would.

But as she came to the well-worn dirt path she could follow toward the house, she caught sight of Ben galloping toward her.

She began shouting his name and waving her arm as she rode. When she could see his face clearly, her gut tightened. He looked frantic and anxious.

"Sadie, what are you doing out in these parts?"

"Trying to find you."

"There's no use. I've talked to all the men I knew who would either sell cattle or want to take on extra, and no one's seen anything. The only thing to do is try the next town over, but I don't know if I'll make it there and back before sundown."

Sadie hated seeing Ben like this. He was stuck and upset, and the last thing she wanted was him riding out in the night when anything could

happen.

There were still plenty of bandits and outlaws in these parts.

“Oh, Ben, I’m so sorry.”

“Only thing to do is head right to Larabees’ farm and end this once and for all. This time, I’m not leaving until they tell the truth—all of it. And then I’m taking them to the marshal, whether they come willingly or not.”

Ben sounded so resolute that it frightened Sadie. She knew he wasn’t the fighting type, but he had reached the end of his rope.

The only thing she could do was try to convince him he had it all wrong. If he went to the Larabees and accused them again, there was no telling what might happen.

Both families were desperate and hurt by whoever was behind it all.

“Ben, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Sadie, the Larabees are gonna pay. This might be a difficult time, but I promise you we’ll talk once this is all over.”

Ben looked ready to gallop away so Sadie pleaded with him. “Wait, please! Ben, there’s something you don’t know about all this.

“The Larabees aren’t behind all these things happening to the ranch. There’s someone else sabotaging your family’s ranch, and we need to figure out who before it’s too late.”

“Sadie, my god. The Larabees have been causing problems on our farm nearly my whole life. I know the truth—I was here.”

Sadie could tell he was furious at her words, but she still had to try. “I know it looks like the Larabees, but it’s not. It can’t be.”

“Why would you try to defend them? Why now, when we’re about to lose everything?”

The desperation in his voice hurt, but she hoped when he understood her perspective, he would feel differently.

“I know it wasn’t the Larabees because I’ve been talking to Nina Larabee. We’ve become... friends. At the quilting bees.

“Nina told me how their cattle have been rustled too, their hens stolen, other livestock, and their ranch is struggling awfully. She even thinks they might have to sell.

“If they were stealing from us,” Sadie asked, “why would their ranch be crumbling, too?”

Ben just stared at her for a minute. She hoped he was considering everything she’d just said, even though it was a lot.

Just when she thought he was about to speak, he looked away from her.

“You lied to me.”

“What?”

“You lied to me, and that woman lied to you.”

“Ben, no—that’s not the case. Nina, well, you should have seen her. She’s a wreck.”

“How could you keep this from me?” Ben finally met her gaze, and his eyes were misty and wet.

“No, Ben, it’s not like that. I swear.” Sadie wasn’t even sure what she was saying, but she just wanted to fix it all.

“I’m not sure this is gonna work. A wife shouldn’t lie to her husband.”

Sadie could feel her heart cracking at his words. When she had arrived in Cottonwood Springs, she had put all her energy into creating some sort of community, despite the ongoing feud that she knew was having a negative effect on the town.

Everything she had heard about the feud only made her want to bring the community closer because none of it added up. If only the people of the town had talked to one another more often, this all would have been resolved years ago.

Sadie was sure Nina must have told at least one other person about the troubles on the Larabee farm. And didn't people talk, spreading news?

It just seemed odd to her that after speaking with Nina, it was all so clear that whoever was causing the problems on both ranches was neither a Larabee nor a Fields.

"But Ben, didn't you hear what I said? It's not the Larabees because of all the things happening to the Larabees, too. Nina is distraught. She can't be lying."

Ben scoffed. "Sadie, Nina isn't gonna tell you the truth. It would wreck their entire strategy."

"You don't understand. No one could fake this kind of thing. She's genuine. Honestly," Sadie said.

Even if Ben was mad that she had become friends with Nina, there was no reason for him not to believe what was going on. It was far too elaborate for Nina to fake.

"The Larabees are the kind of people who would fake that sort of thing. And they'd sell it real well," Ben told her.

"You don't understand because you didn't grow up with them breathing down your neck, wrecking everything just when you let your guard down. People like that do whatever it takes.

“Maybe they’ve been tricking Nina just to make sure her reaction is genuine,” he said.

“Ben, you can’t be serious!” Sadie was flabbergasted.

Ben was so certain that the Larabees were the ones causing the trouble that he wouldn’t listen to reason. The simplest explanation to her was that someone else was behind it all; no one would go to such pains to make themselves look like victims.

And keeping it from their own relative—Patrick lying to his own wife? It just wasn’t believable.

“I know you’re angry that I kept something from you, but I wish you would just listen to me,” Sadie said, hoping her tone might get through to him.

“You lied to me, Sadie. You’ve been spending time with the enemy and didn’t say a word about it to me, your husband. That’s not just something to be angry about.”

“I understand you’re upset but—”

“No, Sadie. A marriage can’t be built on lies. I’m not sure this is going to work at all.”

Sadie couldn’t believe Ben meant what he was saying, but she could see that he did. He stopped looking at her altogether and it almost looked like he wanted to gallop off as quickly as he could.

She hadn’t expected Ben to react this way when she told him about Nina. She knew he would likely be mad, but she never thought he would want to end their entire marriage over it.

It hurt her terribly.

And as certain as she was that Nina was telling the truth and that there was a nefarious person or gang hiding somewhere in their

community, it didn't matter in the present moment.

Ben didn't believe her, and now he was so mad she had deceived him he was reconsidering their entire marriage. Sadie could have cried if she wasn't so frustrated by it all.

Why won't he listen? It's all so plain to see.

Ben held the reins of his horse taut. He was steaming with anger—so angry that he couldn't string a sentence together.

If he'd had it his way, he would have left Sadie in the road, there and then, after she confessed her deception, and rode off toward the next town. But he knew it was ungentlemanly to leave a lady like that, let alone his wife.

And the window during which he could head into the next town and make it home in the same day had long passed. Everyone would be far too worried if he spent the night away from the ranch, and he wanted to check in with his parents.

So, Ben rode silently next to Sadie, whom he could tell was starting to get angry herself.

This hadn't been how he envisioned the day going. He'd thought at least one ranch he visited in the town's vicinity would have either had the cattle or some information about someone trying to sell cattle off quickly.

Out of desperation, he had even asked about previous instances when their cattle had gone missing, but no one knew a thing. Ben could only think the Larabees had become experienced at cattle rustling.

They must have had some system in place to do it without getting caught, over and over again. He had no idea how, but he just knew it was them.

Only a Larabee would be so dedicated to exacting such an elaborately spiteful scheme.

And that was why Ben couldn't understand why Sadie had befriended Nina Larabee. Out of all the people she could have gotten to know and spent time with, she had chosen the one person she should have avoided at all costs.

It made no sense to Ben, and it hurt deeply.

His parents' marriage had been chiseled away at by the Larabees' attacks. And the ranch itself had declined in profit every year for the past decade.

That sort of sabotage wasn't something Ben felt a person should be able to overlook, but somehow, Sadie had. And for what?

She may have felt like she was gaining a friend, but he was sure she was only being used by them via Nina. Or worse, Nina somehow was a victim in all this, too.

When he really thought about it, though, Ben was certain they must have used Nina to get close to Sadie so they could hear about the goings-on at the ranch. It probably had given them the courage to ramp up their nightly attacks.

He was doubly sure they were reveling in whatever hardship Sadie may have reported to Nina, too. And Ben just hated that idea—that Sadie had shared their personal struggles with none other than their foe.

Wives were supposed to be loyal, and this wasn't what loyalty looked like. He couldn't guess how much Sadie had shared with Nina, but he was sure it was enough to cause problems and embarrassment.

How could she put her own social desires above her duties as wife and her obligation as a member of the family? Did she really care about the wider community more than the Fieldses?

I thought she was a Fields.

He couldn't help feeling a bit sad as the realization dawned. Sadie hadn't quite settled into being a Fields—into being his wife.

She still had her eyes on creating the ideal community she'd always dreamed of, but in doing that, she'd forgotten the most important things. He thought they'd always put family first; he never imagined she would rather side with the Larabees to achieve her goals.

After what felt like a long ride back to the Fields ranch, Ben and Sadie made their way to their home near the river. Ben could tell she was just as furious as he was now; apparently the lengthy, silent ride had done nothing to calm their emotions.

The minute they walked through the front door, Sadie stalked to their bedroom. He could hear things rustling and being hastily moved around.

Ben poured himself a dram of bourbon, downed it, then walked over to the bedroom.

There, he saw the trunks she had arrived with splayed out on the floor and being filled with all manner of things. Sadie was just whipping items into them as fast as she could.

“Why'd you have to go and make friends with the likes of them?”

She wouldn't look at him. Instead, she answered his questions while throwing more items into her trunks.

“Yes, I planned it all out to be a conniving little wife. That's what you think, right? That I came all this way to get one over on you? That's just the kind of person I am?”

Her voice was vibrating with emotion, but Ben didn't like her tone.

“I never said you came out here planning to betray me. It's just

something you did.”

His arms were folded as he waited for a response.

Sadie slowed and looked at him with narrowed eyes.

“If that’s the kind of person you think I am,” she said, “I’m glad to be leaving you. Leaving this ranch full of nothing but hatred for your very own neighbors!”

Ben scoffed. “You’d hate them, too, if you had any idea what my life had been like growing up here.

“Waking up to whatever mess the Larabees had left on the farm and hearing my parents yell and scream. Saying all manner of things to each other out of desperation and anger.

“You’d want to do more than just hand them over to the marshal if you were in my shoes.”

“I’m sorry that your life wasn’t easy, but neither was mine. At least I listen when you talk to me,” she pointed out. “You didn’t listen to a word I said about Nina and the feud.

“You’re so wrapped up in all this fighting you can’t see what’s coming next.”

One of her trunks was filled so she shut it and started to fasten its buckles.

“I did listen to you, Sadie, enough to hear you taking the Larabees’ side on every little thing. That was enough for me. I couldn’t stand to hear it all from you.

“You’re supposed to be a Fields. Thought that meant something to you, but I guess not.”

Sadie was fastening the second trunk as he spoke, then she stood and

grabbed them both swiftly. She didn't even look at him as she barrelled her way toward the door.

Ben stalked behind her, just as mad and ready to see her leave. Once she made it to the porch, he grabbed the door, ready to slam it as soon as she stepped onto the grass.

Except she didn't. Sadie stood for a moment, then dropped her trunks and rubbed her hands.

Ben could tell her hands were already hurting from carrying the trunks out to the porch so quickly. Sadie sighed and turned to look at him, with a regretful look on her face.

The anger was cooling as he met her eyes, and he couldn't help but feel worried for the state of her hands.

He walked toward her and grabbed them, massaging them for a moment before speaking.

"I guess those are a bit heavy all at once."

Sadie just nodded. Her eyes looked big and sad.

"Listen, I'm..." It wasn't easy to say what he thought he should say. "I'm real sorry," he began, finally.

"I said a lot of things in the heat of the moment, and I don't really want it to be like that for us. Enough with the fighting," he said. "We don't have to be like my parents."

Ben wrapped his arms around Sadie, and he could hear a few sniffles sneaking out.

"I need you to be on my side, Ben. And to know that I'm on yours. How could you think I'd ever be so callous?"

Ben stroked her hair as he tried to reconcile it all within himself. Sadie

wasn't a bad person. She was still the girl he'd written to about family and making something of this ranch.

He had to remember that, and if she said there was more to conflict than he had ever thought, then somehow, he was going to have to listen—and really listen this time.

“I just don't trust 'em. Those Larabees... I don't know. Can barely remember a time when things weren't like this.”

Everything Ben had been through flashed through his head. Losing Peter. His parents' fighting. How Peter had been the one to calm them when they were angry with one another.

And how Ben had always watched it all happen from his room or some other quiet place, feeling helpless.

Those days were long over, and now Ben had the opportunity to change things on the ranch for the better. But what he needed to avoid was making the same mistakes his parents did.

They had let the feud with the Larabees turn the house into a war zone.

Ben didn't like that he and Sadie were only a few weeks into their union and they were already arguing so drastically. His wife had nearly left him.

He held her closer for a minute, considering all that he nearly lost. He'd heard his mother threaten to leave in the heart of arguments so many times that after a while, it had lost its effect.

Even seeing her pack didn't convince him or his father. And that was a terrible thing.

He had to remember that Sadie wasn't used to all this conflict. And Ben had to make a commitment to himself—and to Sadie—to make sure their marriage didn't end up the same.

He never wanted to see Sadie pack her things to leave ever again.

“But don’t you trust me?” she asked, her voice tiny and plaintive.

Remorse took him over as he clasped Sadie’s head in his hands. “Of course, I do. Of course.”

He had to trust her. Despite what she had done and his fears about what the Larabees might be trying to do with Nina, Sadie was his wife, and they had made a commitment before God.

They had chosen to bring their lives together, going through great strife to do so. He couldn’t just lose faith in their bond now. They had to honor their commitment above everything else.

That meant doing difficult things and maybe even things he didn’t want to do.

“Tell me again about Nina Larabee. What did she say about all these bizarre goings-on?”

That night, Sadie and Ben had quietly gone to bed together and snuffed out the candle on the bedside table.

They had spent the rest of the day talking as Sadie tried to explain the situation with Nina and the Larabees, and how it related to the Fieldses' predicament.

But no matter how hard he tried or how many times she explained it all, Ben just couldn't wrap his head around what she was saying.

He wasn't trying to be difficult, but everything she said just sounded so far-fetched.

As they lay next to each other in the dark, Ben could feel the tension in the air. He didn't like the idea of going to bed like this.

They weren't furious with one another, but there still was a distance, as though they were at a difficult impasse. Yet, they were still beside one another.

Despite all his parents' fights—and there were so many that were too terrible for him to recall—they always went to bed together. His father never got sent to the barn to sleep, like he heard happened with other kids' parents.

They stuck by each other through it all, and Ben knew that if he and Sadie had any chance at a successful marriage, they would need to do the same.

"I guess today didn't go as any of us planned," Sadie said, yawning.

"It sure didn't."

Ben didn't know what to say next. Usually, they would just chatter about anything and everything before dozing off, but now it felt a little awkward.

There was one thing Ben wanted to ask about but didn't have a chance to during their earlier talks. He knew it might be a bit tough, especially for him, but he needed to know.

"Sadie, what did you tell Nina Larabee about us? I mean, us as in the Fieldses and our ranch."

There was a pause, and Ben felt his heart racing. He hoped she wasn't about to drop another confession on him that angered him.

"Not a whole lot. I don't think it was much at all. I told her about all the things that were thought to be done by the Larabees, of course. We needed to tell each other those things to figure out what was really happening."

"Mm hmm, and?"

"And... well, she knows the ranch is struggling. But so is theirs. It's like the exact same thing is happening to them as us."

Ben felt annoyed at the idea that the Larabees knew the ranch was struggling. It made him feel hot with embarrassment, but he understood Sadie's point.

And, usually, he would have smirked at the downfall of the Larabees. There were nights when his parents got so angry they'd even think of ways to put them out of business for good; but it was all just talk.

His parents weren't those kinds of people—they weren't Larabees. But, after hearing what Sadie shared from Nina, he took no joy in hearing

their ranch could be struggling, though he wasn't even sure what he believed.

Ben was still worried about what else the Larabees might have learned about the family. He wasn't sure what they were capable of, so any morsel of information given to them could've been used against them already.

"Did you tell her anything personal about the family? About me, or my folks?"

Sadie paused again, and Ben tried not to get angry even before she spoke.

"Not... a lot. She's a friend, Ben. So, we did talk about the things that girlfriends talk about. Like marriage and in-laws and those sorts of things.

"She said the elder Larabees fight all the time, too, and it makes her sad to see it."

"You told her my parents fight often? Jeez, Sadie..." Ben trailed off, wincing at the idea.

"What's the big deal? Everyone gets in fights when they actually care about each other."

"I know, Sadie. I know. It's just grating on me to think they know our personal business. But how do you know you can trust her? You haven't been in town that long."

"You forget I spent my life moving from town to town. It makes you the kind of person who can read people well and fast.

"I get a sense for someone right away, but with Nina it's more than that. We've talked about so many things and shared so many deeply personal parts of ourselves with one another.

“That’s unusual,” Sadie told him. “And it’s how I know she’s genuine in what she’s saying.”

Ben laid there, staring at the darkened ceiling. He’d never really opened up to anyone like that other than Sadie.

He wasn’t friendless by a long shot, but he also didn’t have those types of relationships with anyone in town. Things were more casual and surface-level, talking cattle ranching in general or the weather.

Ben just never took the time nor saw the point of going much deeper with anyone. Well, other than Ike, their family friend.

Ike was the one person he knew he could share some of his thoughts and feelings with, and the goings-on at the ranch. Ike never doubted that the Larabees were behind it all, either.

He’d always listened to their troubles and helped when he could.

“I’m not sure many people in town connect like that, you know?”

“I do, Ben. The quilting bee has made that rather clear. I think at every session people get a little more comfortable, but I can’t tell if anyone is building true friendships yet.”

He noticed the anxiety in Sadie’s voice and felt sad that her cheerful optimism had been dampened.

Maybe she had been wrong to hide her relationship with Nina from him, and he wasn’t even too sure if she was right in trusting the woman, but Ben didn’t want to see her positivity extinguished.

If that happened, it would be like the town won, and instead of Sadie changing things, it would have changed her.

There wasn’t anything Ben could do at the present moment to restore her spirit, and he was too mired in stress anyway, but he did know one thing that would at least make her hopeful.

For now, Ben knew he had to trust her and find out for himself if everything she said was true. If the Larabees weren't making it all up, and they really were being targeted by someone else, then there might be others facing the same challenge.

Since no one talked or traded stories, it was possible no one ever noticed that similar things were happening around town. It seemed far-fetched to him, but for the sake of his marriage and for the sake of his family, Ben knew he had to work with Sadie to find the truth.

"So, what's our plan?" he asked.

There was a pause, and then Sadie replied, "What do you mean?"

"Well, we're gonna do this, aren't we? Get to the bottom of it all? We need a plan for tomorrow morning."

"What about the ranch and all the work that's piling up?" He could hear the worry in her voice.

"We need to put that on hold, or there'll be no ranch at all."

Ben hated admitting how dire things were, but it was the truth. For all their worrying over the past few years, they had finally reached the no point of no return.

Either they solved the ongoing feud and got the missing cattle back, or the ranch would be sold and they'd all be left wondering where to go and what to do. Now, that included Sadie, and Ben didn't like the idea of disappointing her like that when their marriage had only just begun.

"We'll need to talk to more local ranchers. This time, ask how their business is, see if anything odd's been going on. They might be resistant, but if we go together, it will be easier."

"That makes sense, though it was tough when it was just me today," Sadie confessed.

“Did you speak to a rancher?”

Ben hadn't realized she had visited someone's property on her own.

“I did, and for nearly the entire conversation, the man had his hand on his holster.”

The news made him unhappy that someone had perceived Sadie as a threat, but he knew that was just how people were in these parts. You could never be too sure about anyone's intentions.

“We'll be careful tomorrow, Sadie. Don't you worry.”

“Before I left, he became a little friendly, but it's still hard to get used to.”

Sadie was certainly getting a whirlwind introduction to life in California. The feud had never caused this much commotion, and he couldn't but frown at that, thinking that maybe Sadie's closeness with Nina had somehow caused things to worsen.

He wasn't blaming her at all, but the timing of everything was so strange to him.

“It'd be good if we went over and spoke with Ike, too,” Ben said, now thinking about what they could do to help. Ike would likely have some advice even if he had no useful information.

“Oh, that wonderfully successful rancher? I'll bet his ranch is lavish.”

“I don't know if it's real lavish, but it is nice. He's never said anything about problems on his ranch or knowing of others going through problems. Ike's probably the only person in town who knows everyone around these parts.”

“He knows everyone?”

“I would say he must. Ike operates a lot of business beyond his ranch.

He owns the store where the post office is located.”

“Then Ike must know things. And I’ll bet he must know all the history between you and the Larabees,” Sadie said.

“He sure does. He’s the one who’d help bring my parents’ spirits back up when they were really down. Ike’s a good person.”

He was just about the only person in town Ben trusted with his life other than his family. The man had always come through for his parents, even providing new hens once when nearly all theirs were stolen in the night.

There were times when if Ike hadn’t acted, Ben was certain the ranch would’ve gone under.

“I guess nothing much has happened to his ranch. Knowing about the feud and the strange things happening, I imagine he would have said something if it was happening to him, too,” Sadie offered.

Ben knew she was right, but he’d never considered it before. Ike had never made mention of anything untoward happening to him or anyone he knew in town.

Often, Ben felt like the Larabee-Fields feud was the only news in town. Ike would mention minor details here and there about customers or cattle runs, but there was never any significant conflict or problems.

And Ben was certain he knew people even in neighboring towns. Cottonwood Springs had been lucky as nearly all the trouble with outlaws over the years happened outside of the town’s boundaries. Ben even wondered what the marshal did with his time.

Soon, both Sadie and Ben were feeling sleepier and their chatter was fading. Ben was ready to turn over to sleep when Sadie spoke.

“Are you still mad at me?”

Truthfully, he was still mad at her, but it was the kind of mad that wasn't fiery. It was more that he couldn't let go of the feeling of betrayal just yet.

But Ben didn't want Sadie to go to sleep upset or sad. They were working on things and finding a way through it all, and that was what was important.

"It's hard for me," he started. "Never been in this situation before. I want to trust you more than I trust anyone else. More than my parents.

"But if what you're saying is the god's honest truth, then my whole life will have been a lie."

The next day was warm and sunny, like most days in

Cottonwood Springs. Ben and Sadie had risen early to tend to a few necessary tasks on the ranch, like feeding the livestock, collecting the eggs and seeing to the cattle, before focusing on the day's task.

Ben had tried to do as much as he could before heading back to the house and collecting Sadie to begin their journey.

As he had told her the night before, they needed to give their day to finding out the truth, even if it left a lot of work incomplete or even untouched. Ben just hoped it would be worth it.

By the middle of the afternoon, Ben and Sadie were nearing one of the last ranchers they wished to question.

They had visited so many townspeople Ben hadn't seen in ages—some, it must have been years—and it made him realize how distant people in the town had really become.

As a kid, he would spend some days in the schoolroom in town, but once those days were over, he rarely saw the usual merchants and busybodies in the town, nor the kids who came to school or their parents.

Now, as he introduced himself to local ranchers, there were people he recognized who didn't recognize him, and vice versa. It felt a little regrettable considering how small the town was.

The ranch they rode onto was the same ranch Sadie had visited yesterday where she had initially received a frosty reception. Ben was certain things would be easier with them riding together, but he kept alert just in case.

Everyone in the West knew they needed to protect their property, so Ben understood the man's reaction, but some people were more trigger-happy than others.

So far that day, the two had visited with nearly ten ranchers, and not a single owner had reported anything bizarre or destructive happening on their property.

Even when Ben pried into less obvious things, like a fence collapsing or maybe some livestock escaping—things that one could overlook as accidental—none of the ranchers mentioned anything.

They experienced the usual ups and downs of running a ranch, but all were in good spirits, even when they said business had been slower than usual.

Ben didn't want to act pleased or smug; he wasn't that kind of person. The day's events had turned out just as he had expected them to, despite how certain Sadie had been.

She believed what Nina told her, and he was trying to remind himself that her willingness to trust so easily was a good thing, even if it was leading them astray at the moment.

As they walked onto the ranch, Ben looked around. It was the most modest ranch in Cottonwood Springs, and Ben hated the idea that anyone would target a humble rancher as his family had been.

He honestly didn't know what answer he wanted to hear—that the ranch had been targeted and was suffering and Sadie was right, or that the ranch was fine and the Larabees really were as bad as he and his parents had always assumed.

When they neared the house, a man in muddy denim emerged from behind the house.

“State your purpose,” he called out.

“Howdy,” Ben returned. “You might remember us from yesterday. We just wanted to ask you some questions, if you don’t mind.”

He and Sadie dismounted their horses and walked over to the rancher, careful to show their hands were empty.

“I remember. She came looking for you not long after you came through here. Guess she found you.”

Ben couldn’t help smiling at that. “She sure did. Say, have you had any problems with damage on your ranch? Or missing livestock?”

“Such as a fence breaking when you knew it was in good repair, or similar,” Sadie added.

The rancher stood for a minute, scratching the scruff of his beard. Ben could tell Sadie was anxious for his response as she stood squeezing her hands.

“Well, I can’t say I have. Our ranch ain’t much more than a few heads of cattle and these here fields. The wife and I manage it okay and get by all the same.”

“Never had any hens stolen or cattle rustled?” Ben asked.

“If that happened, we wouldn’t have any left. Why, there bandits about?”

Ben was about to speak when Sadie cut him off. “Possibly. Well, we’re not too sure. That’s why we’re asking around.”

“Sadie,” Ben chastised in a low voice before returning his attention to the rancher. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. There’s no

bandits or outlaws that we know of.

“Sorry to have disturbed you.” Ben tipped his hat then moved toward his horse. He could hear Sadie bidding the man good day and doing the same.

As they mounted their horses, Ben felt annoyed once again, but he was trying not to let it get to him. They didn’t speak until they were off the rancher’s property and heading back home.

“You can’t just go around telling people you’re worried about outlaws. You could have people in a panic and rushing to get the marshal involved,” Ben warned.

“But I just wanted to be honest. We don’t know what’s going on.”

“That kind of talk scares people. California isn’t like the East. There’s some real dangers out here if you stray too far off the path.

“And sometimes even in towns, if a band of outlaws targets you,” he added, a bit hesitant. “There’s been reports of whole towns being slain, Sadie.”

He didn’t want to scare her, but Sadie didn’t understand how easily she could be injecting a deep fear into some of the local ranchers.

“I had no idea,” she said quietly.

“Let’s not dwell on it. In any event, no one reported any incidents or untoward goings-on. Seems whatever is happening is just at our ranch.”

Ben knew he sounded a bit matter-of-fact and almost uppity, but it was hard not to let his emotions get the better of him.

When Sadie didn’t reply, he noticed she was frowning and looking away.

“Well, let’s go see Ike and hear what he has to say,” he added. “It looks as though the Larabees are behind it all, but maybe something has changed with Ike. You just never know.”

Ben didn’t believe it, but pretended in case it might help Sadie’s mood. He didn’t want her to think this had all been a fool’s errand to appease her because that wasn’t the case.

He needed to rule out all possibilities so there was no doubt in either his mind or Sadie’s that the Larabees were behind the rotten things happening on the Fields ranch.

“I just don’t know,” Sadie said.

“If there was a gang of outlaws in these parts targeting ranches, wouldn’t they hit more than just ours and the Larabees? Ike’s is the biggest and nicest ranch in these parts. Wouldn’t they want whatever he’s got?”

Sadie didn’t respond again, and Ben thought it was best to just drop it for now. They would be at Ike’s ranch within half an hour, and he would be their last stop of the day.

Being certain what Ike would say, Ben knew an argument would be impossible to avoid later.

Ike’s ranch was expensive and held two large homesteads, and the grounds were dotted with fruiting trees. He had several fruit orchards of plums and oranges, and as Ben grew up, he had watched as Ike’s orchards grew and grew, and the man became more prosperous.

Ben had always thought that if he had his brother’s positivity and motivation and Ike’s business sense, he would be unstoppable. And before Sadie came, most days he didn’t think he had an ounce of either.

Ike’s main house was visible from the trail that led onto the property. It was grand and pristine in white, with an opulent wraparound porch,

something that looked like it was transported from a painting.

Ben noticed Sadie's eyes go wide. "That's his?" she asked.

"Sure is," Ben said. He knew the house was impressive, and he liked seeing Sadie so mesmerized.

And he liked being close with Ike, and how Ike had always been good to him and his family. It felt like if the most successful man in town was looking out for him and parents, then they must be doing something right.

Despite the Larabees' lies, Ben knew he and his parents were good people, and having a good relationship with Ike confirmed that as far as he was concerned.

Whenever he or his family spoke of their troubles with the Larabees to Ike, he was always full of sympathy and never once doubted that family was behind it all.

Ben had never seen him as the kind of man who stoked trouble; Ike was always careful to give him and his parents practical advice to help their ranch recover from whatever was damaged or lost.

He never suggested retaliation or even heading to the marshal for justice. Instead, he always said the best revenge was to do well.

But Ben knew they were well beyond the stage where success would resolve things; if there was no ranch, then certainly the Larabees had won.

Before they dismounted their horses, Ike came out of his house to greet Ben and Sadie.

He was wearing a finely tailored suit in a gray check pattern; it was something Ben hadn't seen before, and he wondered if Ike had ordered it from the East or even farther away, given his means.

“Well, Ben Fields and the lovely Sadie Fields. What brings you all the way out here on such a fine autumn day?” Ike asked.

Ben met him with a hearty handshake, and the two smiled and laughed, happy to see one another. Sadie seemed a bit more hesitant as she stood by Ben’s side, but she smiled and shook his hand when prompted.

“Come on inside. We’ll put on a pot of coffee.”

They followed Ike inside and into an enormous, formal parlor. The dark velvet curtains that adorned each window were tied back with large, gold tassels, and Ben was sure the tables were made from a wood he couldn’t name.

Ike’s success was something Ben aspired to; he always had. But with the way things had gone with the ranch, it was becoming more possible that just keeping the place up and running would be all the success he could hope for.

After the coffee was brought in by Ike’s wife, who also provided a selection of cookies, Ben asked Ike how his ranch was faring.

“Things are just fine over here. We have a busy operation running. Lots of cattle—two fields’ worth now. Planning to have some sold off before winter with any luck.

“Orchards are mighty fine, I must say—this year’s plums were exquisite. And what about you, Ben? How is the ranch, and your parents?”

“Well, that’s sorta why we’re here, Ike. Things aren’t so good. We just wanted to ask if you’d had any trouble on your ranch as of late. Any cattle rustled, other livestock damaged or missing. Anything like that.”

Ike looked surprised at the question. “Why, no. Not in the least. What’s been going on, Ben? Is your father alright?”

“He’s okay, but we’re real worried. We’ve lost too many heads of cattle, amongst other things. I’m sure it’s those darned Larabees, but we thought we’d ask around to see if anyone else was targeted.”

“I see,” Ike said.

“The thing is... I’m just not sure it is the Larabees. It could be outlaws or someone else who wants the Fields and Larabees out of business. For what reason, I don’t know, but that’s why we’re asking around,” Sadie said.

Ben was steaming mad. Not only had she brought up the subject he’d just asked her not to, but she had made it abundantly clear that they were having a disagreement.

He didn’t want Ike to see they weren’t getting along; it was embarrassing. And the man had just confirmed what he suspected all along—that there wasn’t some gang of outlaws coming after the town’s ranches.

“Looks like you two don’t quite agree, do you?”

“No, sir. We don’t,” Ben said. He was sure Ike could hear the irritation in his voice.

“Now, I’m going to be a bit forward and give you two a piece of advice as a long-married man. You two must work together when conflict arises.

“You’re not always going to see eye to eye nor agree on everything, but you need to master the art of compromise. It’s the only way you can work toward all your goals together when you disagree on how to get there. Give and take, you see?”

This was why Ben admired Ike so much. He wasn’t just successful at ranching and business affairs, but he was a family-oriented man who cared about his marriage.

Ben did want to be like him, and he knew everything Ike had said was right. It wouldn't be easy to follow his advice. Yet, he and Sadie had to try.

"We'll take your advice, Ike."

"Good, good. Now, you must get to the bottom of whatever is going on down on your ranch. I know you and your parents have spoken to me about these troubles off and on for years now.

"If the Larabees are truly behind this, you can't let it go on any longer. You have to do something about it. And you're a married man with your own home now, Ben. It's a good time for you to tackle this."

When Ike spoke that way about him, it didn't make Ben anxious like how he drove himself to despair thinking about all the ways he didn't stack up to Peter.

Ike made him feel like he was capable. Ben believed in himself when Ike spoke to him.

"I will do something about it. Like you said, we've been dealing with this problem for so long now. It's time to bring an end to it all."

"Now, that's the spirit, Ben. Whatever you need, I'm happy to help. You can come to me whenever you need to."

Ben thanked Ike, and he and Sadie finished their coffees. He felt hopeful, even though the task ahead wouldn't be easy. When they were ready, he and Sadie stood to leave.

"Here," Ike said. He pushed an envelope into Ben's hands.

"Oh, no, I couldn't," Ben protested.

"Please, take it. It might not be enough to replace your cattle, but it should at least alleviate a bit of stress for the immediate future."

Ike patted his back and walked him toward the door with Sadie trailing behind. There was no way to refuse the money, and Ben knew his family could use it, so he stuck the envelope in his inner coat pocket.

“Come back any time. If you need me, I’ll be here.”

Ben shook his hand again, and Sadie followed suit before they walked toward their hitched horses. He hadn’t imagined he’d be leaving Ike’s place with a little cash to put his mind at ease, but he was even more grateful for how he felt.

Ike believed he could resolve this conflict, and that made him more confident. For the first time, he started to believe he really could end it all.

Sadie followed Ben to the horses, feeling deflated. Ike was a kind man with a generous disposition, and she knew she should have felt a little cheerful to have his support.

And the difference in Ben's attitude after speaking to him was obvious. But it all added up to the last thing she wanted—that Nina Larabee had been lying to her the whole time.

It just seemed implausible to her, and almost impossible. Nina was the only real friend she had in Cottonwood Springs, and the two had shared so much of themselves with one another.

Their hopes and dreams, their worries, and the difficulties of marriage... Sadie just didn't understand how someone could be so two-faced.

If Nina was lying, she had perfected her performance to an incredible degree. She ought to have pursued a career as a traveling actor if it were true.

Nothing made sense to Sadie anymore, and it was sending her into a rotten mood. If her instincts about people were suddenly so terrible, then what had her difficult life given her?

She always thought her ability to judge people and her talent for making connections were the great strengths she earned over the years.

But it seemed that everything she'd learned didn't apply in Cottonwood Springs. The rules were different, and she was learning that the hard way—jeopardizing her marriage and all.

Sadie hadn't completely abandoned the idea that her instincts about another actor being behind the problems on the ranches, but seriously entertaining the idea that Nina had lied was enough to upset her.

For the entire ride home, she fell silent, not wanting to speak to Ben. Her mind was running through different explanations as to what might be happening, and she didn't want to share any of them with Ben, knowing they would just anger him further.

His reaction when she'd told him about Nina had put distance between them, and although they had done their best to remedy things before bed and find their way back to one another to work toward the same goal, there was still a gulf between them.

She had never felt this withdrawn from him since they were married, and it broke her heart.

Even though Ben didn't want to admit it, the fact that no other ranchers had experienced incidents on their ranches didn't rule out the possibility of the Larabee and Fields ranches being targeted by someone or a gang.

It was unusual, to say the least, but not impossible. There was no point in bringing this or any other thought to Ben, however, because it would just set them back and grow the distance between them.

Sadie hated how she suddenly couldn't speak her mind with her own husband. It was the last thing she wanted.

She had always assumed her husband would be the one person she could always share everything with, though some of Ben's anger was warranted. She should have shared her relationship with Nina with him. But there was nothing she could do to change that now.

As quiet as Sadie was being, she had expected Ben to attempt a conversation of sorts during their ride home.

She thought for sure he would point out how it looked like Nina had lied or even rub it in that things were pointing away from her theory given what people in the community had said.

Or for him to even start arguing with her outright, telling her how wrong she had been.

Yet, he never did. Ben hadn't said a thing.

When they arrived home, after putting away the horses and getting them settled for the night in the barn, they headed to their home. The long walk along the river was just as quiet as the ride home, and Sadie wasn't sure if it was a good or bad sign.

Still, she did her best to enjoy the walk as the sun began to set. It was her favorite time of day, and she wanted just a little bit of joy to return, even if it was fleeting.

When they reached the house, Sadie stayed outside just a little bit longer to watch the sunset and feel the last warmth of the day.

Afterward, she refreshed herself, changing into a comfortable indoor dress. It was too late in the day to make a start on the ample work they had overlooked to investigate the situation in town, and she was exhausted from it all.

She sat at the kitchen table and held her head in her hands, feeling as though she could doze off there and then.

Ben was working away in the kitchen, and Sadie glanced at him a few times. She had planned to cook dinner but needed to recuperate before she got back on her feet.

Yet, it seemed he was making something for himself, and her heart sank as she wondered if he was so mad at her he didn't even want to

eat her cooking.

Somehow, that felt worse than silence.

Just as she thought he was going to sit down and eat a meal all to himself, Ben placed a plate of bacon, bread, and vegetables in front of her. She looked at him, shocked, and he just smiled.

Despite everything, he still cared and wanted to take care of her.

Sadie felt warm from the gesture, and she was appreciative. Even though she said nothing, she smiled at him, hoping he could read her thoughts as well as she read his presently.

All of this just wasn't easy for her. Marriage was uncharted territory.

Sadie knew there would be challenges she couldn't predict, but she'd never thought that within the first few weeks of marriage, she'd be embroiled in a feud that might cost her entire family their livelihood.

Nothing added up, and it was causing a terrible divide between her and Ben, and yet here he was being so kind to her despite it all.

Perhaps this was what a true bond was, what building trust felt like. It was all so new to her.

Later that night, Sadie lay in bed with Ben. Although the earlier act of kindness had left her feeling warm, they had hardly spoken the entire night.

Sadie would smile at him, and he would return it, but only momentarily. Even last night, they chatted until they became sleepy. Yet tonight felt different.

She didn't know what to say to Ben. She still felt like she couldn't share her unvarnished thoughts with him right now.

It was a horrible feeling, and one she hoped would pass swiftly, but

for now she had to be cautious, for herself and Ben. She had lain down on her side of the bed and gotten comfortable, and Ben had done the same. But neither moved toward the other.

Now, she stared at the darkened ceiling, not yet ready for sleep but unable to do much else.

Soon, she felt hands slide around her waist and draw her close. She found her head on Ben's chest as she curled into his side.

A wave of relief washed over her, even though they still spoke no words. It was enough to be this close and feel the beat of his heart.

Sadie loved him, and even if right now nothing was solved, at least they could still show each other they cared. This was what love felt like.

"Ben, what will you do next?" she asked quietly.

"Not sure."

She snuggled closer.

"Think it's about time to talk to the Larabees."

The next morning, Sadie woke up alone. It was a bit later than she usually rose, but it seemed she slept so heavily she wasn't even woken by Ben readying himself for the day.

They'd agreed to do their best to catch up on their responsibilities on the ranch before making a plan to visit with the Larabees.

Sadie felt nervous, and she hoped Ben would let her lead the talk, at least, but that was something to worry about later. For now, she had work to do.

Before washing, Sadie wanted to see the hens and gather up any eggs they may have laid since yesterday.

Most days, each hen laid an egg, but now that there were fewer hens and someone had broken into the coop to take them, it seemed the birds were spooked and laying eggs irregularly.

It was another worry for the ranch, but Sadie had hope that the hens would settle over time.

As she made her way toward the coop, she looked at the horizon. The sun was rising swiftly, and she could feel the beginnings of what would be a warm day.

The crisp autumn nights were something she was starting to like, too. Although she would never miss the yearly snow she'd left behind, there was something refreshing about the cool night air that floated in

during twilight.

While looking at the sky, Sadie nearly tripped over something. When she looked down, it was a piglet.

“What on earth?” she said, looking across to the pen. The gate was wide open. “Oh no!”

Sadie scooped up the piglet and ran toward the pen. She couldn’t believe something like this had happened again. First the cattle and now the pigs. It was a nightmare.

When she arrived at the pen, she fastened the gate securely and returned the piglet to its rightful home. But as she looked around, she noticed several of their mature pigs were missing.

Panic set in as she saw a lone hat lying in the mud. It was a Stetson, and one she recognized: it had been worn by Patrick Larabee the last time she saw him.

“This can’t be,” she said. Braving the mud, Sadie cautiously walked to the hat and picked it up. She had no choice but to tell Ben what had happened, but she was distraught.

How could Nina be lying—and how could she lie so well? It boggled Sadie’s mind.

Sadie was carefully maneuvering herself over the fence of the pen when Ben stalked up to her and snatched the hat out of her hand.

When she wobbled, he grabbed her hand as well and helped her over. As she found her footing on solid ground, she could see Ben was nearly steaming with anger.

“See, see?” he shouted.

A terrible feeling overtook Sadie. She had given Nina the benefit of the doubt because she could sense she was genuine, but it seemed she

was somehow mistaken.

And that mistake was having dire consequences for her and Ben.

She had trusted Nina over what her own husband told her. Sadie could see it now so clearly; she should have just trusted Ben's word and kept Nina at arm's length.

Now she wasn't sure how she would ever repair things between them.

"Ben, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Sadie sobbed.

Tears streamed down her face as she pleaded with him for forgiveness. "I can see I was terribly wrong. I'm sorry I didn't trust you. I just hope you can forgive me."

For a few minutes, Ben just stood there, clutching the hat. Sadie was sure he was going to shout at her or chastise her for how foolish she had been.

And she felt she deserved it now; she had made him traipse across the town all yesterday, chasing evidence for her silly theory when the truth was right under their noses.

It was what Ben had known all along.

"I'll never be so foolish again. I promise you that, Ben. I swear," Sadie said, and she meant every word.

Then Ben hung the hat on the fence and stood in front of her, taking her head in his hands. She couldn't meet his eyes for all her crying, so he just kissed her forehead and then embraced her, rubbing her back.

"I'm not mad at you. It's okay."

"What?" she asked, shocked.

"I'm not mad at you, Sadie. This isn't your fault. This is the Larabees'

doing. They've always been behind it all, all the pain and strife in my parents' marriage. And look at us now, trying to follow in their footsteps."

Sadie nodded, knowing Ben was right.

He was so wise to see things so calmly despite the situation. She wasn't sure she would have reacted the same way if it had been her with years of the Larabees' wreaking havoc in her life.

"I'm gonna end this once and for all. I'm going over there now, with that hat, to see what they have to say for themselves. They can't deny it now."

Ben was pulling out of their embrace and grabbing the hat when Sadie tried to stop him. She didn't want to make things harder, but she wanted to be the one to talk to the Larabees first.

"Ben, I want to be the one that confronts them. I made things difficult by believing Nina, and I'd like to speak to her first.

"Once she sees the hat, she can't deny it any longer, and she'll have to confess all her lies," Sadie explained. "She owes me that much."

"I don't know, Sadie. We don't know what these Larabees are capable of."

"It will be at the quilting bee. What could she possibly do there? Please, Ben. Let me talk to Nina before you confront Patrick."

Ben was still hesitating, but he agreed. It was a lot to have asked of him, but Sadie was relieved he gave her the opportunity.

Somehow, she had trusted the wrong person, and Sadie wasn't taking it lightly. She needed to confront Nina and understand why and how she had lied to her for so long.

It was the only way Sadie could understand so she could make sure it

never happened again. Nina owed her an explanation, and as much as it pained Sadie, she had to end their friendship.

It was heartbreaking knowing that her first real friendship since she was a child would be ending this way, but Sadie knew it was the only option. In time, she would try again.

And maybe once the feud was settled, it would be easier to grow closer to more of the women in town. Sadie would remain hopeful, but later that night she would see Nina at the quilting bee.

The conversation would be painful, but the pain would be temporary.

It was worth it to see the end of this horrid feud once and for all.

The quilting bee was scheduled for four in the afternoon. It gave ample time for the women to join and enjoy tea and sandwiches and then work as late into the evening as they chose.

Sadie had so loved seeing the progress on everyone's quilts and quilting squares as the weeks went on, and it was satisfying watching how at each meeting, the women grew a little bit closer or more comfortable around one another.

It was just a shame that this meeting wasn't going to be pleasant for her or Nina.

Sadie had dressed well for the meeting and collected all her things before setting off for the quilting bee. Ben was out working the ranch, so she hadn't seen him, but she was still grateful he was giving her this opportunity.

She had placed the hat in her bag of sewing materials and hidden it under material so it wouldn't be easily noticed.

Confronting Nina would be one of the hardest things Sadie had ever done—maybe even harder than leaving for California—because Nina was her first real friend as an adult. The first person she shared so many of her insecurities and worries with as a newly married woman.

Cutting that connection was going to hurt.

This meeting was at a home on the other side of town. The property

was next to town, so it wasn't a long ride for those who lived around the main street of the town, but it did take Sadie a little longer than usual to make the trip.

She arrived just after four and hitched her horse next to the few others that had been left by a hefty water trough. She saw Nina's horse and her stomach flipped, reminding her of her task for the evening.

"Why hello, Sadie. Nice to see you," Marjorie, the homeowner, said. She was a tall woman with a heavily wrinkled face, yet she always had a chipper disposition.

From what Sadie had gathered, she was a widow who happily ran what was essentially a miniature farm on the land for quite a few years after her husband's passing.

Her farm only consisted of a couple very small fields of crops, but Sadie had thought it was charming every time she passed it.

Marjorie hadn't attended all the quilting meetings but had started showing up to the last few and was happy to offer her home for the occasion. She was a little more outgoing than the other women, which made Sadie wonder if she had lived in the town her whole life.

Either way, Sadie felt happy that word of the quilting bee was spreading throughout the town and new people were still joining.

It meant the community was talking more, and that people felt like spending time together. If the day wasn't so overshadowed with gloom, Sadie would have been beside herself with joy.

"Hello, Marjorie. Thank you so much for hosting the quilting bee. Your property is lovely," Sadie said.

"Thank you, Sadie. It's my pride and joy."

Sadie could tell how much Marjorie loved her life on that little farm, and Sadie only wished the Fieldses would eventually find some

happiness on their ranch one day.

She couldn't remember a time when their happiness wasn't interrupted by something horrible happening, and she had only been there a few weeks.

As Sadie took her seat in the parlor, she saw Nina sitting across from her. They usually sat beside each other, but that particular night, all the seats had been taken, and Sadie couldn't help but find it fitting.

At least it would give her an excuse to ask Nina to join her outside briefly. The last thing she wanted to do was disrupt the meeting or cause alarm, or share their business publicly, but she was going to have to ask Nina to join her at some point.

"Well, I sure hope I can get caught up to the rest of you," Marjorie said as she sat down with her sewing supplies.

"You don't have to worry about catching up," Sadie said. "At each meeting, we exchange squares and make notes about how many to make for next time.

"Now that you've been joining us, your quilt will be filled with squares from everyone here, it might just take a little bit longer."

"Oh, I see," Marjorie returned. "I've never heard of anything like this."

"Have you lived here your whole life?" Sadie asked.

She figured she could ask since she was still new. The other townspeople may or may not have known, but likely didn't want to admit it.

"Moved here when I was eighteen years old. From New York City, originally. Quite the trip out here in those days. A lot of the way was by covered wagon."

A few of the younger women gasped, while the older women nodded

and hummed in agreement.

“That must have been scary,” Nina said.

“It sure was, but that’s why the West is how it is. Only the bravest came out here.”

All the women smiled and exchanged knowing looks, and Sadie looked on in amazement. Marjorie was right; everyone here had either journeyed a terribly long way for a chance at a new life that would be better than the last, or they were born to people who had done just that.

It was remarkable. Sadie just wished she could enjoy the moment without all the challenges she was facing putting a damper on it.

Yet, the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if all these problems needing resolution were just part of the journey itself.

After they sewed for an hour, Sadie found her chance to speak to Nina alone without making a scene. Half the women were milling about the kitchen and dining room, munching on sandwiches and cake Marjorie had prepared.

The other women were focused on their sewing, with their heads barely looking up from their work. Sadie stood, grabbed her bag, then briefly sat next to Nina.

“Nina, would you want to just step outside for a minute... just for some fresh air with me? I think I need it.”

She knew her voice sounded odd, but she had to just ignore the awkwardness of it all.

“Why, of course, Sadie. Are you well? Shall we get some water?”

“No, no, I’m okay. Just would like some air and company briefly.”

“Of course,” Nina said.

She set down the square she was working on then stood, straightening her skirt. The two stepped out onto the porch then strolled along it till they reached a bench at the end.

Sadie couldn't believe how kind Nina was behaving, given all that had happened. Was Nina that good at acting, or did she really have no idea what her husband got up to at night?

Surely, she would notice if he left the bed. Sadie just couldn't understand.

“Is that better, Sadie?” Nina said as they got comfortable on the bench.

Sadie just nodded, feeling her emotions begin to well.

She couldn't pretend she wasn't hurt any longer, now that they were alone. And Nina owed her some sort of explanation, even if she really didn't know anything.

“Nina, I have to ask you something. I don't want to, but I have to.”

Opening the bag over her shoulder, she let Nina peer down and see the hat that bore her husband's initials on the underside of the brim. The woman stared for a minute.

Instead of becoming angry or sly, Nina looked like she had seen a ghost. She was terribly white and almost looked faint.

Soon, she was rifling through her pockets until she produced a scarf. Sadie recognized it immediately.

“How on earth did you get that?” Sadie asked.

“I found it in our garden this morning. Someone trampled all our flowers and squashed whatever vegetables had grown.

“It was an awful mess, and it left us with nothing for our winter pantry.” Nina’s voice cracked with emotion.

“Nina, please. Don’t. You can’t keep up this act. Not now.”

“Sadie, what are you saying?”

“You need to talk to your husband and end all this now. Our ranch will be ruined if this continues on any longer.”

There were tears welling in Nina’s eyes, but Sadie didn’t care. She couldn’t fall for her act any longer.

“Sadie, you’re the ones who need to end this. Our ranch is on its last legs, and I have no idea how we’re going to get through the winter. This is just a horrible thing to do to a neighbor.”

Sadie couldn’t believe Nina was keeping up the act despite the evidence she had presented to her. She was an incredible actor, and now Sadie wondered if maybe there were other things Nina had lied about, like her ties to a city on the East coast and all the rest.

Perhaps she was an actor who’d crossed paths with the likes of Patrick Larabee, and it was the perfect match. The longer she sat with Nina and her fake tears, the angrier Sadie became.

Finally, she said one more thing before storming off.

“I trusted you, Nina. How could you? I can no longer call you a friend.”

But as she stalked off, Nina shouted back. “How could you?”

Instead of going back into the house, Sadie walked off the porch and toward one of Marjorie’s crop fields. She had no intention of walking in the field and disturbing what was growing, but she needed some time to herself before returning to the quilting bee.

Sadie would not stay at the bee for long, but she needed to gather up her sewing and give Marjorie her thanks before heading home.

She stopped in front of a small field of wheat. The stalks looked a perfect gold in the setting sun. Sadie just sighed. This wasn't what life in California was supposed to be like.

The quilting bee was supposed to be a fun occasion where she would make ample friends; instead, she had only really befriended one person, and it was the wrong person.

Sadie felt stupid and guilty about it all now, even though she knew Nina seemed like she could have tricked almost anyone with her sincerity.

She just didn't understand why this had to happen to her. If she had made one mistake, it was being too trusting when she didn't know people well.

Never again would she trust anyone so easily. She didn't want to become a cynic or incapable of making friends, but life in the West was proving to be much harder than she expected. Perhaps people weren't the same everywhere.

That was when Sadie remembered Marjorie's words—that people in the West were the bravest people. They'd traversed difficult journeys to get here.

Sadie had never really thought of herself as brave, but from the reaction during the bee, the women who were present certainly thought that of themselves. Maybe this whole situation with the Larabees and Nina was the true test for Sadie—to see if she was cut out for this life.

If the feud wasn't resolved and the lost livestock returned or compensated for, the ranch would be sold, and for all she knew, she could be heading back east for a life of factory work.

Thinking about what Marjorie said, Sadie wanted to make it here more than ever now. She didn't want to lose the ranch, or her husband, or the family she'd just been welcomed into.

She didn't want to lose her life in California or the West. As sad as she felt over losing a friend and the fact that she was still at odds with her husband, Sadie didn't want to give up.

Now was the time to show what she was really made of—to rise to the occasion. She had the opportunity to make things up to Ben.

And she would do whatever it took to end the feud with the Larabees.

The time for playing nice was well and truly over.

It had taken Ben at least a good hour to clear his mind after the incident with the pig pen. He had found a stray piglet hiding behind a rock a few yards away and hauled it back in his arms only to realize one of the mature pigs they had lost was the mother to all these babies.

Ben was beside himself thinking of what might happen. There was another mother pig who had given birth recently, but if the babies didn't take to her or if she rejected them, the piglets could become too weak to survive.

He was angry and perturbed thinking about how someone could be so cruel to harmless little creatures. He may have slaughtered animals for meat for his family, but he'd never harm a piglet or put them in a harsh situation.

The Larabees were lowly, despicable people, as far as he was concerned, and any remaining rationality he held toward the situation was dwindling.

Letting Sadie speak to Nina first was making him impatient, but it was the least he could do given how distraught Sadie had been after finding Patrick's hat.

In truth, Ben wasn't expecting much to come from her conversation. Confronting seasoned liars rarely amounted to much, especially when they'd been so adept at their deception.

He couldn't see Nina admitting anything to Sadie on her own. If she did, it would only prove she was the type of person who could be entirely two-faced with little remorse.

It made Ben angry thinking of Sadie being duped like that, and although he knew it was a tough lesson for her, he had no doubt she would come out of it with renewed strength.

Confronting the Larabees on their ranch would be confronting a den of liars, and Ben was already thinking up ways to corner them into admitting it all.

He wished he could somehow get the marshal to come and listen in, so when he finally forced their hand, he'd be certain about their guilt. Technically, the Larabees could confess it all to Ben, but if they denied it in the company of others, he'd be no better off.

The worst part of the day had been telling his parents what had happened. Since the incident with the cattle, his parents had been almost paralyzed with fear over what might be next.

They hadn't done much work since, and when he called into the house, they were sitting around the kitchen table in silence.

Ben almost wished they had been yelling and carrying on wildly; at least then there would've been some passion left, some fight. But it had seemed like their spirits dimmed.

Seeing his parents look so worn and beat had broken Ben's heart. The ranch was his life, but it was the life's work of his parents.

They had spent nearly half their lives building it up into something substantial only to see it chiseled away at over the years. Each chip pushed them a step closer to having nothing left, and he could only imagine what sort of pain that left them in.

The last thing they had ever wanted to happen was about to happen.

The three had spoken for nearly an hour, and Ben's father had agreed that the only step left was to put the ranch up for sale immediately after Ben spoke to the Larabees.

Neither he nor Eli expected the Larabees to give back the pigs or the cattle; they'd never been successful in recouping any of their losses so that was unlikely to change.

The only person who had helped here and there was Ike, and though they appreciated what he gave them, it was never enough to cover what was lost.

Selling would be a frustrating process given everything his father had shared. It was unlikely they would get a fair price for the ranch, especially if the Larabees were looking to buy.

They and anyone else local would know what a dire situation the Fieldses found themselves in, which would give them the advantage to offer less than what the ranch was worth.

The best-case scenario would be to find an investor from some other part of California or one of the other states, but neither knew how likely that was to happen.

Oddly, Ben had started thinking about what would happen to a new owner. If the Larabees weren't successful in buying the land, wouldn't the feud just continue, with the buyers being the Larabees' new target?

He guessed that might finally convince the marshal that there was wrongdoing, but by then it would be far too late for the Fieldses. And if the Larabees didn't continue the feud, it just meant that their problem with his family had been personal.

There was no good answer and no use in even considering it all.

While he visited with his parents, Ben had given them the money Ike had given him. He told them what Ike had said about ending things

with the Larabees once and for all, leaving out the parts that involved Sadie.

He didn't want them to know about her relationship with Nina Larabee if he could help it. It was going to be a dire time for them, selling the ranch, and he wanted the family to stick together.

Even though Ben was working to find a way to get over what Sadie did, he was certain it would be a step too far for his parents. They wouldn't forgive her, and he wasn't certain they'd still recognize her as their daughter-in-law.

When Ben had finally left his parents, they were still sitting quietly at the table. Ben had promised to return the next day after he spoke to the Larabees, and in the meantime he had asked them to stay strong and hope for the best.

For the first time, his father clasped his hands and thanked him, just like he used to do with Peter. His mother hugged gratefully before sending him on his way with a freshly baked loaf of bread.

It was then that Ben realized some of the stuff he found daunting or that he thought was beyond him was coming naturally to him.

He didn't like the situation they were in with the ranch and the Larabees, but he noticed that his words were becoming firmer and his parents were looking at him a little differently. It was as though they were beginning to trust his instincts, and that he was, too.

There was no telling what would happen in the coming days, yet Ben could sense that he felt up to the challenge.

Later that night, when Ben returned home after catching up on all the work he could before sundown, the mood inside was somber. Sadie had returned from the quilting bee by seven, and then spent time in the kitchen making herself something to eat.

It seemed she didn't want to talk yet, and Ben didn't mind giving her

space. But he could already guess how things had gone with Nina.

Finally, when she had eaten her supper and a dessert, she came and sat in the parlor.

“Nina kept lying,” was all Sadie said. Her eyes were red from crying.

“I’m sorry, Sadie. That’s real lousy of her.”

Sadie just nodded and sniffled.

“Tomorrow morning, I’m going over to the Larabees’ to talk with Patrick and his parents. I have no idea if they’ll listen to reason, but I have to try.

“We’re going to lose everything if they don’t give back what they’ve taken in the last two weeks,” he told her honestly. “That’s just where we’re at.”

Sadie just nodded.

“Maybe they want us out of business so they can buy the property themselves and expand. But I have to hope maybe they’ve been doing this all for kicks, not thinking of the consequences. It’s foolish, but maybe it’s the case.”

“Would they really buy up the land to make their ranch bigger?”

“I think they would. My pa said Larabee had made comments here and there, but I don’t know. Never heard any of it myself.”

“What will happen when we sell?” Sadie asked. Ben could see the worry in her eyes.

The problem was, he didn’t really have an answer for her. Ben wasn’t sure what the actual process of selling would be like or what they would be left with when all was said and done.

Even if they got a decent price for the ranch from some out-of-town buyer, how and when they'd get the money, and where'd they go next, were a mystery to Ben.

He had a small sum of his own, and it would be enough for him to take Sadie to a new town to make a plan to start over. Depending on the town, he could possibly get a space to provide a service or sell some goods.

He would have no idea what he was doing, but if he had to do it, he would.

Yet Ben didn't think it would pan out that way. If the whole family were starting over, he was positive they would stick together and pool their resources to give them better options.

Ben didn't think staying in Cottonwood Springs would be a choice. Not only would it bring unhappiness on his parents knowing they were still in the vicinity of the Larabees, but it would drive them crazy to see the likes of them use their old property and have their way with it.

For all he knew, they would tear down the house that Peter had built.

Ben's throat caught at the thought. He wouldn't be able to bear it himself; it would be like losing the last little bits of Peter he still cherished in his daily life.

"If we sell, we'll be leaving town. That's all I know for sure. Where we'll go or what we'll do is anyone's guess. You've got some factory experience, so at least there's that."

Sadie looked devastated at his words. She nodded but said nothing. It almost looked like she had gone somewhere else in her head by the way her eyes were glazing over as she sat.

It hurt Ben's heart to see her like this, but he just didn't have the energy to tell her things would be fine. The truth was, he had no idea

if they would be.

Ben rose and headed to the kitchen to clean up the dishes they used for their separate suppers. Sadie followed, and in silence they cleaned up the kitchen and readied for bed.

Ben didn't like seeing Sadie look so sullen as went to wash up and then return looking just as distraught.

Yet, long gone was the impetus to try and fix things between them—to try and reconcile or make things better, if only temporarily. It wasn't that Ben had totally given up on Sadie or their marriage; he was just exhausted.

Exhausted by what felt like endless days riding around trying to find answers only to come up empty handed. And exhausted by countless nights trying to reason things out with Sadie and fall asleep on a positive note.

There were no positive notes left, and as it stood, Ben had no drive left to repair what had broken between them.

After washing and readying for bed, the two crawled in on opposite sides. Ben faced away, and a minute later he sneakily glanced to see if maybe Sadie had turned toward him.

She hadn't.

How did things get so bad? Ben was angry at himself now.

Maybe he didn't have the energy to console Sadie or attempt some sort of reconciliation, but he hated feeling the distance between them.

It startled him to not feel the desire to fix things, but he knew his fatigue and doubt were taking over because he didn't know how—not until things with the Larabees were resolved.

If he lost the ranch but then he also lost Sadie, Ben knew that would

be a far worse situation. He couldn't afford to end up with nothing, but more than that, he loved her.

Sadie had become his everything, the reason he wanted the ranch to succeed again and why he wanted the feud with the Larabees to be over.

She was why he'd completed the home that Peter had begun, and she was why he'd tried so hard to take care of the ranch and his parents along with it. She was the reason he had become just a bit more confident in his decision and ideas, even if they conflicted with hers.

Sadie had made him a better person.

Ben turned toward his wife and watched her for a moment. Things weren't always going to be easy, and there would be plenty of days and nights where they disagreed and got angry.

Or even when they hurt one another.

But Ben had to make some effort to close the distance. If he didn't, they could lose their partnership and the distance might grow exponentially until they no longer connected at all.

Despite how difficult it was, Ben wrapped his arms around Sadie and pulled her in close. He kissed the top of her head and then resettled on the pillow.

He wanted to sleep like this, with Sadie wrapped up in his arms. No matter what happened that day, if they could end things like this, they would always stay by one another's sides.

Content, Ben sighed and settled in further.

He could feel Sadie snuggling in closer and getting comfortable, too. Even though they said nothing, they were speaking through these little things, and it mended Ben's heart just a bit.

Just as he was about to drift off, there was an odd scent in his nose. He sniffed hard, but it only intensified the scent.

It smelled like wood burning, as though someone had a fire going, and a big one.

Ben bolted up in bed. *Fire.*

Ben's heart pounded in his chest as he hurried to pull his coats and boots on. The scent of wood burning was becoming stronger by the second, and he just knew there was little chance what he was about to find wouldn't be a large, blazing fire.

As he rushed outdoors, he heard Sadie calling after him, but he didn't have time to stop. From the porch, he could see the barn in the distance.

Flames were climbing the walls and leaping to the grass, scattered by the winds.

Sprinting, Ben headed toward the barn.

He wasn't sure what he could do, but he had to do something. The barn was where their horses stayed during the night. It also held all the feed for the pigs and piglets and other supplies for the cattle and other livestock.

If he could at least get the horses out, he could save them and worry about rebuilding the barn another day. The supplies would be a loss, but it would be the best he could do.

As Ben neared the barn, he could feel the heat of the flames. The entire structure was engulfed now, but worse, the flames had set the field behind the barn alight, burning the entire yield to a crisp.

The amount of land burning was far too large to contain. And

somehow the flames had made it across the river and were inching across the Larabees' land.

"How on earth..." Ben was exasperated, finding it impossible to understand how this fire had begun and spread so quickly, and all the way across the river to the Larabees.

It boggled his mind, but he had little time to dwell on it. Instead, he ran to the barn and looked for any space in the structure that wasn't engulfed in flames.

He circled around the barn until he saw the back barn doors were as yet untouched. Covering his nose and mouth with his shirt, he ran up to the barn and swung open the doors.

The unsettled horses, neighing and kicking, darted out immediately onto the land, and Ben tried to steer them away from the flames and back toward the house.

There was no time to tie them up, but it didn't matter. As long as they were away from the flames, he could collect them later in the day when the sun was up.

The heat from the flames was baking Ben's skin. It felt almost like he was getting tanned in the hot sun, but Ben knew it wasn't the case.

If he stayed too close to the barn for too long, his skin might burn. With all the horses freed, he backed away and watched the barn burn.

Suddenly, Sadie was by his side.

"Ben, my god, what's happened?"

"I don't know, Sadie."

"What can we do?"

Ben heard his mother shouting from a distance, followed by his father.

“Fill buckets up with water from the river. Start dousing the barn! Come on, git going!” Eli was yelling.

Despite wanting to do all he could to save the barn, Ben knew tiny buckets of water weren’t going to save the barn.

It was already a loss, and he was finding it hard not to break down, knowing they would barely be able to scrape together the money to rebuild and replace the feed, tools, saddles and everything else that was lost.

“Ben, why are you just standin’ there? Come on, son!”

He ran to his father’s side and then to the river, filling the buckets. For what felt like ages, they threw water on the barn, ran back to the river, filled the buckets, then repeated the cycle.

When it was clear to everyone the barn was lost, they focused on extinguishing the flames on the ground, trying to stop them from spreading on their property any further.

An entire field and a half had already been lost, and Ben knew any further losses were like one more nail in the coffin for the entire ranch.

When Harriet tried to return to the barn to throw more water on it, Eli stopped her. He held her arms firmly. “It’s no use, my love. It’s gone, it’s gone.”

Eli’s voice cracked as he spoke, and both he and Harriet embraced, giving themselves over to their despair. Ben stilled as he watched, feeling his emotions threaten to freeze him in place.

Then, he felt Sadie behind him gently placing her arms around him. “I’m sorry,” was all she said.

Ben couldn’t understand how things had got to this point. He was watching their barn burn to the ground while their crops were being

turned to cinder.

It felt apocalyptic, and yet somehow, he was still standing. So much had happened on the ranch in his lifetime, and these unfortunate occurrences had begun to feel like part and parcel of daily life.

He should have been screaming or running to get help, or doing something more than just standing, watching everything burn. Yet, a part of him knew there was little he could do.

They had dampened the grass to contain the fire as best they could, and in a few minutes they would need to repeat the process. That was it. That would be the next few hours on a loop.

A fire like that rarely started on its own unless the weather was scorching hot. But it was the middle of the night, in autumn.

Something was wrong—terribly wrong—but Ben didn't have time to process it.

Instead, he watched his mother drop to the ground, her head in her hands as she cried. Eli was trying to comfort her as best he could, but Ben could see the tears streaming down his face.

Ben wanted to say that this wasn't the end. That they could rebuild and replace everything.

That the crops lost were just that—a loss—and they'd have to focus on another endeavour to try and recoup some of the lost income. He wanted to be optimistic and strong, but he couldn't.

There wasn't anything he could think to say. With everything that had happened in the past week or so, it had felt like the end of the ranch.

At some point, each of them would have to admit that the end had arrived, despite the little things they could do to try to get by. Selling the ranch made more sense now; it was down a barn and had ruined fields that would need extra care to be used for the next season.

Even if Ben spent the next month building a new barn, they would need to use what little money they had to replace all the supplies. *And then what?* he wondered.

Whatever happened next would be the real end, except they'd be all the worse for it with no extra money to help smooth their passage into whatever their new life would be.

Ben swore and kicked at the ground and Sadie rubbed his arms. He could tell she was trying to provide some comfort and having her near was helping, but it also made Ben all the angrier.

Sadie had come all this way to start a new life. She had put in time and effort to build up acquaintances and friends in the community.

She was trying to foster some sort of communal spirit. And yet, she would be left with nothing along with this family. It was hardly fair.

Ben couldn't help but wonder if she would have been better off never meeting him. It pained his heart terribly, and so he did his best to push away the thought.

"Ben, I... I don't know what to say."

Before he could reply, the barn lurched forward, crackling with flames.

"Watch yourselves," Eli called out. He helped Harriet to her feet then embraced her as they backed away from the barn by several yards.

Ben grabbed Sadie and did the same, and the four stood together with their eyes on the barn. Soon, it lurched again and collapsed in on itself.

It almost felt like slow motion to Ben as he watched. Timber planks piled atop one another, and flames poured out of windows now horizontal instead of vertical.

“In all my life I never imagined this,” Eli said. His voice was flat and tired. “This ain’t no accident. I can’t believe they would stoop so low trying to put an end to our business.”

There wasn’t a lot of anger in Eli’s words. Ben’s father seemed to be at the end of his rope—almost as though he were accepting things the way they were.

“No one could have guessed they’d go this far.” Harriet sniffled.

Sadie was quiet, and Ben thought it was for the best given all that had gone on between them. As they stood, Ben glanced toward the river where the flames seemed to have doubled.

There was nothing he could do to dampen them now. Getting near them would be too dangerous; he just had to hope they would naturally come to their end.

At least no flames were heading anywhere near their house.

Ben surveyed the blaze, taking note of the wind and the direction it was spreading, and he looked at the Larabees’ property. The flames were crawling across their fields at an alarming pace, and they looked heading directly for their barn and stables.

The Larabees had double the livestock the Fieldses had, with a large stable of horses, some for work and some for leisure. It looked like the flames would take both buildings.

Looking around, Ben couldn’t see the Larabees anywhere, nor could he hear them frantic and yelling. Suddenly, it felt like there was a bowling ball in Ben’s stomach.

He shifted away from Sadie’s embrace.

“Ben, what is it?”

“Looks like it won’t be just our barn going down tonight,” he said,

gesturing into the distance.

“Oh no,” Sadie said. Her voice was tinged with sadness.

“Don’t you two be holding any worry for the likes of them. They’re the ones behind this. They deserve whatever comes their way, with God as my witness.”

None of this sat right with Ben. He knew they were behind it, but he wasn’t sure how they’d done it all.

And if it somehow backfired and their land was about to face destruction, there wasn’t much Ben could do but he wasn’t about to let them sleep peacefully through it all.

Thinking it over, he began to stalk away from his family.

“Ben, where you goin’? Son, it’s the middle of the night. Best to wait till morning to confront ’em. Need our wits about us.”

“Ben, please, you must be careful,” Harriet called.

“Something’s gotta give,” was all Ben said.

He was stalking toward the Larabees’ farm with vigor, feeling angrier with each step. They had gone too far this time, and he was sure they would admit it given how things were going.

If they destroyed their own land just trying to get one over on the Fieldses, then certainly they would have their tails between their legs.

Ben huffed, certain everything was about to come to a head. They couldn’t weasel out of the accusations this time. He wouldn’t let them.

“Ben, what are you doing?” Sadie was running behind him.

“Sadie, stay back. This is my business now.”

“I know what’s happened is awful, but I don’t think escalating things is a great choice.”

Ben nearly snapped but he held himself back. “We’re going to have this out once and for all. They can’t run from it this time.”

“But their barn, look!” Sadie called.

For a moment, the two stood staring at the flames that were just reaching the Larabees’ barn. The stable was on the other side and it already had flames crawling up its sides.

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

“It sure don’t, but they’re gonna pay. They aren’t getting off this time,” Ben declared.

“But Ben, wait...”

She tried to hold his hand, but he pushed it away and kept stalking toward the home. He wasn’t trying to offend her or hurt her, but he didn’t have time for theories or speculation now.

Ben knew what he had to do now, and he wasn’t about to let anyone stop him.

Before running after Ben, Sadie stood by the burning remnants of the barn for a minute. She couldn't believe her life was going up in flames—all the Fieldses' work that amounted to a lifetime now burning before her eyes.

She knew it wasn't the entire ranch in flames, but too much had happened.

With each sabotage, they had inched closer to selling the ranch—now, it seemed there was no way out of it. Too much had been lost.

She felt heartbroken, for herself and for the Fieldses, and for a minute she bowed her head and closed her eyes, thinking of a prayer.

She wasn't really a religious person, but when things were unbearable, sometimes she meditated in prayer, even if only for a minute, to find some clarity.

Sadie stood silently for a minute and found some quiet within herself. When she was ready, she opened her eyes, intent on catching up to Ben. Except something caught her eye.

Near her feet was the stub of a cigar.

Sadie kneeled to look at it closer. The flames were still blazing with force, so the entire yard surrounding the barn was lit up.

The stub was a little less than half a cigar, which was odd, given that

neither Ben nor his parents smoked cigars. As Sadie cast her eyes across the grass, she saw a few more cigars stubs, smoked to differing lengths.

It seemed that someone or somebody had been here smoking, then discarded everything messily in the grass. And had perhaps used a cigar stub to light the fire.

She thought of the Larabees first, but she couldn't say she ever heard Nina speaking of Patrick or his father being cigar smokers.

It didn't mean that they weren't, but something told Sadie that this was the hint she needed to find out who was behind all these bizarre events on both ranches.

It had been convenient that Patrick's hat had showed up in the pig pen the same day Nina found Ben's scarf on their property. In truth, it was far too convenient.

As she looked at the discarded cigars, Sadie was more certain than ever that there was someone else entirely behind the long-standing feud, and that both the Larabees and the Fieldses had been played like fiddles the entire time.

Sadie ran to catch up with Ben and tried calling him, but he was determined. She wanted to get his attention, to tell him what she saw, but it was no use—when she tried to grab his hand, he just pushed hers away.

Sadie wasn't mad; she could see Ben was determined to reach the Larabees' homestead as quickly as possible. She decided to wait for her moment, given that having the Larabees present would be another way to prove that someone else was behind it all.

Ben made it to the Larabees' front door and pounded and shouted. Sadie caught up, her heart pounding and her lungs heaving.

"Patrick Larabee, come on out o' there!" Ben called. He banged noisily

a few more times.

The two elder Larabees came to the door in dressing gowns.

“What’s all this commotion? Oh, it’s you,” Elder Larabee said.

“Your plan backfired, and now look.” Ben pointed to the barn.

“My god!” Patrick’s mother yelled.

The flames were gliding up the side of the Larabees’ barn with ease. It would soon be engulfed, just like the Fieldses’ had, and would likely collapse all the same.

Sadie felt terrible for the Larabees as she watched them realize what would happen.

Patrick and Nina appeared on the porch in all the commotion, and Patrick, having seen the barn burning, began yelling and running toward it.

“Son, it’s no use. Save your energy,” the elder Larabee called.

“Pa, the barn. The horses.”

Patrick ran to the stable and was lost from sight. Sadie hoped he could save the horses or some of the livestock without harming himself.

She looked across to Nina, who stood with her head in her hands, looking terribly worried. Sadie didn’t say anything, but she felt awful for her.

Sadie, Ben, and the Larabees moved toward the stable once they saw Patrick had successfully let the horses out before it went up in flames. The elder Larabee rushed to rein in the horses and hitch them to the house, and the rest watched on as the barn burned hot.

It was burning faster than the Fieldses’ barn had burned, and Sadie

noticed the tears in Patrick's mother's eyes.

Soon, Eli and Harriet Fields stood beside Sadie, as they all watched the last moments of the barn's life. It was a replay of what had happened on the Fields farm, except louder, stronger and the fire was burning with more intensity.

Both families stood watching in stunned silence. The destruction of the barns felt like the end of something, and Sadie only hoped it would mean the end of the feud itself, once and for all.

When the fire began to settle and the crackling quieted down, the sound of Nina's crying became louder. Sadie glanced at her and saw she had her face buried in her hands.

Patrick was trying to hold back his own tears as he stood staring at the remnants of the barn. Without thinking twice, Sadie walked to Nina and took her hand.

She patted and squeezed it, and when Nina finally looked at her, she tried to give her a smile despite everything.

She and Nina had fought terribly, and now Sadie felt sorry for it all.

She should have trusted her own instincts the entire time; both her and Nina should have trusted themselves as far as Sadie saw it, but what was done was done.

"I'm sorry, Nina," Sadie whispered.

"We're done for," Nina returned. It broke Sadie's heart to see her like this.

"Well, Larabee, what do you have to say for yourself? What was the point of all this when now you're out a barn, as well?" Eli called out.

"Me? You're the one who's done this. Don't try to make out like it was us," the elder Larabee retorted.

“You think we would torch our own barn just to burn yours down? What kind of lunatic would do that?” Patrick said.

Nina and Sadie just looked at each other, not ready to interject.

“Just admit it now. We’ve been through more than enough. Both families have lost a barn tonight which will set us back this season if not permanently.

“So come clean, Larabee,” Ben said, looking at Patrick. “Tell the truth once and for all.”

Still battling his emotions, Patrick wiped at his eyes. “You have some nerve coming over here when we’ve just lost a barn and god knows how much livestock.

“Stop blaming us for all your problems,” he said, pointing his finger at Ben.

“Is this some sort of game for you? You like seeing us spin while you turn the wheels behind the scenes?” Ben’s voice rose up an octave.

“Don’t try and reason with a Larabee, son. Crooks’ll never come clean,” Eli said.

“You watch your mouth, old man,” Patrick warned, with his finger pointing once again.

“This is enough! You wanted our ranch out of business. Well, you succeeded. Can’t you just admit it now?” Harriet screamed, shocking Sadie.

“You must think we spend all our time thinking about you and your ranch. You aren’t on our minds unless you’re mucking up our stuff.

“Why don’t you come clean?” the elder Larabee yelled back.

It was getting out of hand as the families began to yell at one another,

making accusations, stomping feet and pointing fingers. It was nothing new, despite the fact that the families now stood in front of a burning, dilapidated barn and flames spreading through back fields.

It was almost as though they would rather focus on fighting one another than trying to make any kind of effort, even if fruitless, to stop the fire from spreading.

Sadie wasn't surprised. The feud had fueled so much of the Fieldses' actions and choices since she joined the family, and she imagined that it had been that way for some time.

The feud was almost at the center of everything they did. They were always reacting to the latest attack and either fruitlessly looking for justice or scrambling to recover, or letting the entire episode affect their family's happiness.

Sadie had seen how the Fieldses fought together, and it was horrible. There had to be some end to all this conflict and hatred.

"Our ranch has been suffering for over a decade because of the likes of you. And it's time that we end this. Admit what you've done and maybe we won't go to the marshal first thing tomorrow. We'll let you pay restitution," Ben said.

"Pay restitution for what?" Patrick asked, getting close to Ben, chest to chest. "We don't owe you a dime. If anything, you owe us for this here barn, and years of lost income."

It was as though they weren't hearing one another.

"We don't owe you a gosh darn thing, Larabee," Ben spat.

"The fire came from your land. I can see that clearly. Admit it, you did this to end us."

Ben looked so angry, Sadie wasn't sure what he was about to do.

That was when she decided she couldn't afford to wait any longer. She didn't want to see anyone hurt more than they already were.

"Enough!" Sadie yelled, running to the two men to separate them. Nina followed her and grabbed Patrick, and Sadie pushed Ben gently until he backed off.

"Everyone, just stop yelling. Stop fighting. Enough," Sadie said.

She was exasperated by it all, and just felt like everyone was screaming in circles.

"We need to end this tonight, here and now," she insisted. "Once and for all."

"That's what I been saying," Patrick retorted. It was clear he was unhappy to have been interrupted. But Nina held his arm so he couldn't move toward Ben.

"No, end it for real. You're all talking around each other and not listening to one another. Every time I've seen you fight, it's been like this.

"If you'd just listen to each other—to what each other is saying—you'd realize the truth."

Ben and Patrick just stared at Sadie with skepticism while their parents circled in closer to listen. When Sadie looked at Nina, she smiled back encouragingly.

"Patrick, you think the Fieldses conspired to burn your barn down, right?"

"That's right, and they succeeded."

"Right, and Ben and Eli, you think the Larabees conspired to burn down your barn, too, right?"

“Well, that’s right. And they did it, too, our barn’s gone...” Eli trailed off.

“So, by some sort of coincidence, both families targeted each other’s barns on the same night using the same fire?” Sadie stood obstinately, waiting for everyone to get what she was saying.

“Well,” Patrick started. “That don’t make much sense. They’re lying.”

“But they’re lying, don’t you see? You haven’t been listening to one another. Neither of you are lying. Someone did target your barns tonight, but it wasn’t the Larabees or the Fields.

“It was someone else entirely,” Sadie pointed out.

“And the other day, don’t you think it’s a bit weird that Patrick’s hat turned up in our pigpen the same night that Ben’s scarf showed up on the Larabee property?”

“What do you mean, my hat was in your pig pen? I been looking for my Stetson for two days now,” Patrick said. He was starting to look more confused than angry.

“We found it when someone let our pigs out of the pen. It was sitting in the mud,” Ben said.

“What reason could I have to let some pigs out of a pen? And it’s piglet season. Would be darn near cruel,” Patrick said, offended at the very idea of it all.

“Luckily, we got the piglets accepted by another pig, but sure was cruel,” Eli said. Sadie couldn’t believe it, but it seemed like a Fields and a Larabee had finally agreed on something.

“Well, I sure as heck didn’t leave my scarf on your property. In fact, my scarf’s been missing for well over a month,” Ben offered.

“Do you see what Sadie is trying to say?” Nina asked gently.

Patrick folded his arms. "I guess I do."

"There's just no reason why you'd want to burn each other's barns down. Even for one of you to want to do it. Look what happened—the flames spread so quickly.

"And we're just lucky they didn't touch either of the homesteads. As angry as you have been at one another, neither family would stoop so low," Sadie said, "especially considering you haven't been the ones targeting each other the whole time."

"What do you mean?" Eli asked.

Sadie finally felt like she had everyone's attention. Everyone was really listening to what she had to say. She felt it was the opportunity she had been waiting for.

"This entire time, someone else has been targeting both families. Nina and I... well, we figured this out when we started talking at the quilting bees.

"Too many things happened on both ranches either at the same time or it was the exact same scenario. How could that possibly be the case if both families were sabotaging one another?

"And for what reason? None of it makes sense. Why start a fire that could threaten your own land? And how could Patrick or Ben be getting up in the middle of the night to cause problems without either Nina or me noticing?"

The parents looked on in shock, then looked at one another. It seemed they were finally understanding that it just made no sense that the Larabees or the Fields were targeting each other's ranches.

Sadie would have felt relief if only it hadn't taken such destruction for everyone to listen to her.

"Neighbors don't burn their neighbors' barns down," she said.

“Someone else is behind this.”

S*adie's right.* It was all clear now, and Ben just wanted to kick the dirt in frustration. The Fieldses and Larabees had never listened to each other in all the years they were feuding.

Quite the opposite—it had always just been accusations and anger thrown back and forth. Ben didn't want to dwell on it now, though, because they had a bigger problem.

Someone else was behind this, and they needed to figure out who before something even worse happened.

Whoever it was must have been growing desperate. They wanted to see both of the ranches go out of business it seemed, and Ben couldn't begin to guess who would've wanted that.

The ranches had supplied staples to different business owners in town for over two decades. And as far as he knew, the Fieldses' only enemy was the Larabees.

But they had been wrong about the Larabees, it seemed, so maybe they had been wrong about this, too.

The one thing everyone needed was answers. They needed to do more than just end the feud—they had to discover who was behind these destructive actions and seek justice.

Ben didn't want to get his hopes up, but he wanted to at least recoup some of the missing livestock or some money to pay for it. That way,

they wouldn't have to sell the ranch.

Perhaps even that was too much to hope for, but they would need to take things one step at a time. And the first thing they needed to do was compare notes.

Ben took a deep breath and stood between both families. He was going to have to lead the first civil conversation their families had ever had.

It wouldn't be easy, but if they both could keep the same goal, he was sure they could get somewhere.

"Patrick, why don't you tell us what's happened with your ranch over the years? We can see if anything sounds familiar to us.

"And Ma and Pa, let Patrick talk. We just need to listen now," Ben said.

His parents shuffled and folded their arms, but they kept quiet.

"Well now, let's see. It all started when I was a kid. Weird things would happen. Pa would say a hen was missing, or a head of cattle.

"Then, over the years, it just seemed to get worse and worse. We really just thought you all had it out for us. And we couldn't figure out why.

"Last few months, our ranch has been struggling. We're... well, we think we got to sell up. No point beating around the bush—it's that bad.

"The only one who really believed us and gave us a bit of help is old Ike. He's a good guy. Would give us a bit of cash when something went wrong, listen to what happened.

"Guess he's not really someone you know, then," Patrick said.

Ben's heart raced. Ike had been helping his family for years; he would have never thought he'd stoop to helping the Larabees.

And Ike knew the Fieldses blamed the Larabees for everything that happened. He'd even taken to cussing them out along with his parents.

Ben was shaken. It seemed Ike wasn't the loyal family friend he'd always thought he was.

"You know, Ike always seemed to agree it was the Fieldses likely causing troubles. Maybe if we hadn't had him saying that, we would've thought it over. I don't know," Patrick said.

Nina was at his side with her arm around him.

"Ike's been our family friend for decades. Since before the kids were born," Eli said. "Didn't know he was friends with y'all, too."

Patrick scratched his head. Ben could tell everyone thought this was an odd revelation.

"I'm a little surprised, myself," Patrick said.

Ben was starting to feel a bit stupid. Things were getting straight between the Fieldses and the Larabees, but the one person who had really believed him seemed to be sort of two-faced.

Ben thought about how often Ike had built him up, making him think he would be successful or could overcome whatever struggles the ranch faced. He'd said it all while talking about his family behind their backs to the Larabees.

Ben couldn't help but feel it was all lies, though he had no idea what the older man's motivation would be.

Maybe this was the wrong way to think about everything. Ben wasn't so sure.

Perhaps Ike was the kind of person who just wished to be generous and supportive to everyone, and that meant going along with whatever they were thinking.

Except that didn't really mesh with the kind of person Ike was. He had never been shy to set Patrick straight and give him advice. He was a straight talker as far as Ben was concerned.

Suddenly, Ben's thoughts were interrupted by Sadie. She was wide-eyed, like something had just come to her.

"Does anyone here smoke?"

"No ma'am," Patrick said. Nina shook her head, and all the Fieldses replied the same way.

"You've never seen any of us smoke, have you, dear?" Harriet said.

"No, I haven't. But you're sure no one here smokes cigars?"

"Can't stand 'em," Eli said.

"Larabees aren't smokers. Never been our vice," the elder Larabee said.

"It's just that I found cigar stubs by our barn as it burned down. I think the fire was started by a cigar.

"If there isn't someone in one of our families who smokes them, then we know it really is someone else who caused the fire and is likely behind everything.

"And whoever that someone is smokes cigars," Sadie pointed out.

"Well, I'll be..." Patrick said, scratching his head again. He and Nina were looking at each other, puzzled.

"You know, there were stubbed out cigars by our broken fence a few

weeks ago,” Ben said. “Just thought whoever broke the fence took their merry time on it.”

“They probably did. The nerve of someone, committing a crime on your property and leaving behind all their cigars like that.” Patrick shook his head disapprovingly.

“Let’s think,” Sadie said. “There’s got to be someone around town who smokes cigars. This can be our starting point.

“We’ll put a list of names together of people who could possibly be behind this.”

“Sadie, you think like a marshal,” Nina said, smiling.

It was jarring for Ben to see them be so kind to one another, but he was trying not to dwell on it. Things were changing fast, and Ben knew he would just have to get used to it.

The group stood around, thinking and going through townspeople one by one, trying to narrow down their list of possibilities.

“James smokes, but I can’t say I ever saw him with a cigar. He rolls up a fine cigarette, though,” Eli offered.

“That he does,” the elder Larabee agreed.

“The blacksmith and his son are no stranger to a cigar,” Patrick suggested.

Ben knew he was right. Often the town’s blacksmith would work with a cigar in his mouth, puffing away.

Ben never understood how he could work like that, but the smoke didn’t seem to bother him or his son. Eventually, his son had just followed in his footsteps.

“Is there a reason the blacksmith would want to ruin both ranches?

Have you ever had bad dealings with him?" Sadie asked.

"I certainly haven't," Patrick said. "I was in there last week getting the horses shod. He's a man of few words. Can't fathom why he'd want to cause such problems."

Ben couldn't understand, either. He had visited the blacksmith many times over the past few years. He was a pleasant man who had very little to say. It wasn't reasonable to suspect him.

But there was someone Ben knew smoked cigars—and he smoked them like a chimney.

"Ike," Ben spat out. "He loves cigars. In fact, he gave me cigars for my eighteenth birthday."

It was strange, but it felt like some puzzle pieces were beginning to find each other's edges, and Ben didn't like the picture that was forming. Ike had acted as a family friend for years.

He'd been at their house for the most important occasions and given Ben so many gifts. Gifts that Ben had treasured.

He'd even given Sadie the lovely set of China not long ago after they were married.

It should have made less sense than the blacksmith, but the fact that Ike had played the kind uncle to both the Fieldses and the Larabees left a bad taste in Ben's mouth.

"He's been giving you money, then?" Eli said, a little sheepish.

"Well, he did indeed on a number of occasions. Hate to admit it, but it's the truth," the elder Larabee said.

"He's been like an uncle to me," Patrick admitted.

"Me too," Ben said. The two men looked at each other with

sympathetic, knowing glances. Ben wondered if Patrick felt as foolish as he did now.

“He was someone we counted on when times were tough,” he added. “Almost like a member of the family.”

“I think it’s the same for us,” Nina said.

“Come to think of it,” Eli started, “Ike loves a walk down the river. I seen him out there plenty of times. Sometimes would even walk along with him.

“But I never minded him walking along our property, given he was like family.”

“Well, same with us. Let him come and go as he pleased,” the elder Larabee said.

Ben had seen Ike walking a few times, but he guessed that his work had kept him too busy to notice all the times Ike had come and gone. But he’d never seen him on the Larabee property.

And now Ben wondered if the man had been quite purposeful with that, ensuring that he kept his relations with both families hidden and separate. That in itself seemed suspicious.

“He must have something to do with all this,” Sadie said. She looked to Ben, and he nodded in return. There was no getting around it.

Ben knew he would have put aside his personal hurt as they figured it all out. If Ike had been playing both families, they had to find out and they had to make him pay.

As foolish as it would make Ben feel, he wanted to know the truth.

“We’re going to need to confront him to get to the bottom of this, but we’re really going to need to work together as a team to get it done,” Ben said.

They were words he had never imagined himself saying.

All the heads around him were nodding in agreement, and Ben felt relieved. It was odd to be standing with the Larabees in relative calm and quiet.

They'd been talking now for quite some time without arguing, and that was something Ben had never thought possible.

When he had stormed over to the Larabees that night, he'd figured it would end with fists flying. He hadn't imagined they'd end the night fighting together to save both their ranches.

Ben wasn't happy, but he had a sliver of hope in him now.

When the barns had come down, everything felt lost. And Ben was nearly numb to it, frozen in the destruction of so much hard work.

But now it seemed like there was a real chance to recoup at least some of what was lost. Even if they got some of the livestock back, a little money or something, it would be enough to keep them in Cottonwood Springs.

And that was what Ben wanted for his family and for Sadie. In all of this, he kept thinking about her.

Sadie had come here for a fresh start at life—to be with him to work hard on the ranch and make it into something truly great. Ben hated the idea of that dream dying.

If there was any chance that they could keep the ranch going, Ben would fight his hardest to make it so. He wanted to give her everything he promised. Their life together was just starting.

Sure, he knew Sadie was industrious and used to starting over, but he didn't want to do that to her. He didn't want to do the very thing she had run away from back home.

Ben looked at his parents. His father had his arm around his mother and he looked as though he was attempting to cheer her up a bit. He hoped his parents were sharing some of his optimism, despite how things looked with Ike.

The truth would mend a lot of the broken parts of their life, including the terrible fights his parents kept finding themselves in. Ben had hated them growing up and hated them even now.

His parents had directed their ire and hate toward the Larabees for all these years, but it was all but confirmed the Larabees had nothing to do with everything that had gone on.

He couldn't guess what his parents were feeling, but it must have been difficult. They had spent so much of their marriage in turmoil and now it seemed it was all some elaborate ruse.

And Ben hated that. His parents suffered doubly because of whoever did all this, and whoever it turned out to be, Ben was going to give them a piece of his mind.

Even if that was Ike.

"As long as we work as a team on this, we're going to figure it all out. We'll find out who did this and make them pay," Ben promised.

Patrick met his eyes and outstretched his hand. Ben couldn't remember the last time he'd shaken Patrick's hand. In fact, it was likely he never had.

The last time they were on friendly terms, they had been such young kids they still played pretend.

Without hesitation, Ben took his hand and shook it heartily and the two shared a cautious smile. Things would be different going forward, and Ben was okay with that.

They had to be to save the ranch, and that was all that mattered.

The families talked till the sun rose, formulating a simple plan to confront Ike. They would wait until midday and then ride to his ranch together, the men with holstered guns just in case.

They weren't expecting terrible trouble, but in the West they knew better than to come to any confrontation unprotected.

They decided that whatever Ike said, whatever tricks he tried to pull, they would stick together. If it was Ike behind everything, he'd traded on their feud to make his plans work.

He knew they didn't talk and would never see eye to eye on anything, nor believe what each other said, and he'd counted on it.

That was how he could pull off such ridiculous things like causing the same damage to both ranches in one night or leaving behind evidence at both ranches at the same time.

When Sadie thought back on it all, it was rather ludicrous, but even she had fallen for it after seeing Patrick's hat.

Yet that was the reaction Ike likely knew he could count on—a lack of rationality and just quickness of anger. Once emotion clouded judgment, people would believe just about anything.

Since Sadie and Ben had barely slept, they had gone back to their home to try to rest a bit before they met up with his parents and the Larabees for the ride over to Ike's ranch. They managed to sleep for

just a few hours before the stress of the situation made it impossible.

Sadie had risen to make breakfast, and Ben sat nearby, drinking coffee.

Despite everything that had happened, they were far too tired to discuss it with any depth. Instead, they had exchanged some knowing glances.

Sadie could tell Ben knew how relieved she was that he and everyone else finally listened to her and Nina. She didn't need Ben to say anything to her, and she didn't plan on saying anything, either. They were beyond that.

What she cared about was that they were on the same team, working toward the same goals—and now, that team incorporated the Larabees.

Just before noon, Ben and Sadie mounted one horse and rode out to the trail that led them to Ike's place. Soon, they met with the Larabees and Ben's parents, and started on their way.

Everyone looked fatigued, but the purpose with which they rode was evident. No one wanted to waste another moment waiting to confront Ike, given all they had discovered.

Sadie looked around at each of them as they set out on their ride, and she could see the determination in everyone's faces.

She had greeted Nina in a friendly and open way, and it was such a relief. Fighting with Nina had hurt her terribly, but now it seemed like their friendship would be given a second chance, and out in the open with no secrets.

Sadie felt endlessly thankful for that, even if she did notice Harriet's eyebrows raise at just how friendly their greetings were.

As they rode, Sadie held tightly to Ben's waist. They didn't often ride

like this, sharing one horse, but she was glad they did today—not only because she was tired, but because she wanted to be this close to him.

When everything had gone down on the Larabee ranch and Ben had stepped in to lead their first civil conversation in what must have been years, Sadie had been enamored with him.

He was the Ben she knew him to be, and it was a beautiful sight.

“You know,” she said, speaking quietly to just Ben, “when you were speaking back on the Larabees’ ranch, you were so impressive with your leadership.

“You kept everyone focused on the most important things,” she pointed out. “Your brother would’ve been so proud of you. And I’m so proud of you.

“You put aside a lifetime of hate and prejudice to solve this problem.”

She squeezed at his waist as she continued. “It couldn’t have been easy, and that’s why I’m all the more proud you’re my husband.”

She laid her head against his back for just a moment so he could feel her close and then squeezed his waist again. Sadie didn’t wish to do anything inappropriate in the company of others, but she had to show her husband how she felt.

For the first time in days, Sadie felt a little happy. She knew it was premature, but she couldn’t admonish herself.

Instead, she enjoyed the moment, knowing it could be fleeting given where they were headed. Ever since she learned about the feud, she had wanted to resolve it.

It must have been causing problems in the wider community, but she had no idea the entire thing was a sham aimed at disrupting the lives and business of the Fieldses and Larabees.

If Sadie hadn't reached out to the women in town, she might never have discovered the sham in the first place.

It was only because she and Nina had traded stories and discussed what happened on their ranches with each other—the one thing Ben had been so angry she'd done with the enemy.

That was the only way to realize what was happening. All of this wasn't lost on Sadie, and she didn't feel haughty because of it.

Instead, she felt grateful. Grateful that seeking a community had paid off despite only being in town for not that long.

Sadie had always felt community was important. A sense of belonging and knowing there were people she could count on and who would count on her was what she dreamed of.

As she looked around and saw the Larabees riding with them toward Ike's, she couldn't help but feel that this was community, too, even if it hadn't been easy. The two families were now working together instead of fighting, and they would be stronger because of that.

She couldn't help but smile again and hug Ben just a little tighter.

In response, Ben squeezed Sadie's hands, and it made her warm inside.

"I was able to do all this because of you, you know," he said.

"What? No," Sadie said.

"You've made me more confident. I can see that already. And a little less impulsive. I'm thinking about things more.

"Partly because I gotta because, well, I got a wife now, but also it's you, Sadie. You make me want to do better, but you also make me feel like I *can* do better."

He squeezed her hand again.

Sadie was flattered with his words, but she didn't quite believe it.

She loved the idea that she had inspired Ben to become a better version of himself, but she knew he put in all the work. And she had no desire to take credit for it.

"No, Ben. This is all you. I'm just happy to hear that you're feeling more confident."

"Well, I am," he said. "I was a lot more closed off before I met you. Stuck in the past. Thinking about what could've been or what I wished could be, not doing something to make anything happen."

"It's not easy to change like that, Ben, but you did. I'm proud of you," Sadie said. She loved telling him that. It made her incredibly happy.

"Whatever happens today, just know that I'm proud of you and, well, everyone for putting aside this feud. Ike might not be the one behind it, somehow.

"We won't really know until we talk to him, but we can't lose hope and start accusing each other again. If we can hang onto this spirit, everything will be okay. I can feel it," Sadie said.

Maybe she was just trying to will it to be true, but Sadie was certain that sticking by the Larabees, and them sticking by the Fieldses, would be the key to it all.

They couldn't turn their backs on each other now, no matter what happened. And both families had everything to fight for.

Sadie wondered again why someone like Ike might target the ranches. They were side by side, so it was possible it had something to do with property.

And he genuinely liked the Fieldses. He might be two-faced, but no one could act all the time for so many years.

Even if he was self-serving at the end of the day and apparently lacked any moral fiber, he still did kind things for them. *But then again, if he was stealing livestock from them, how could it be kind?*

Suddenly, things seemed a little clearer. Maybe he wasn't acting because he genuinely liked taking from people and getting to play the generous, rich man.

That didn't seem like a convincing reason for the entire charade, but it could've been an enjoyable side effect from the whole thing.

What a dastardly man. Sadie was aware she was convicting him in her head before he was confronted, which was the wrong thing to do, but she just had a feeling about it all.

Growing up, the worst person she'd ever met was the man who stole her mother's first wagon. It went missing one night, and after stalking over every street in the tiny town, they found it out front of a tiny house as though it wasn't stolen property at all.

When they confronted the man, he had said he needed it more than two women should ever need a wagon. And that if they needed to get somewhere, they should rely on a husband.

Vera had been incensed, but she hadn't argued with him. She just took the wagon back and made sure that every night she tied it up so close to the house she would hear if anyone tried to take it in future.

But Sadie had never understood that man. If he needed to get some place, he could have asked to borrow it, and she certainly didn't understand what being a woman had to do with any of it. Men and women both had two legs—they both needed wagons from time to time.

She understood better now. Some people felt like the world belonged to them and that they were entitled to take whatever their heart desired by any means necessary.

Sadie felt certain Ike was the same sort of man, treating others and their land like his pawns and property. It was distasteful, and Sadie only hoped that whatever trouble the confrontation might stir up would be short-lived.

The group had decided that if Ike confessed and agreed to give everything back along with agreeable restitution, they wouldn't turn him in to the marshal.

It wasn't ideal; Sadie certainly didn't like the idea of a man like Ike staying in the community with no punishment. There could be no guarantee he wouldn't do the same thing to others or find a new way to make the Larabees and Fieldses' lives miserable.

But everyone had agreed that getting what they were owed was more important than justice from the marshal. It would be the justice they needed desperately instead.

Sadie didn't think he would confess so easily. If Ike was behind everything, he was a crafty man capable of great deceptions.

She just hoped that they had the upper hand somehow by showing up all together and catching him off-guard.

Ben squeezed Sadie's hand again and then laced his fingers with hers as she held herself closely to him. It brought her out of her thoughts and back into the warmth of her husband.

Sadie loved being this close to him.

"Ben, do you think we can ride like this again? You know, after all this is over with and hopefully, we're all happy on the ranch and everything's fine," Sadie said with some wistfulness.

Ben gently squeezed her hand a few times. "I promise you everything is going to be okay. Ike may be a formidable foe, but we're not going into this alone.

“My parents are here and we’ve got the Larabees on our side. It’s one man against many.”

For some reason, his reassurance made her worry just a little bit more. She hadn’t thought of it like that, almost as though there might be a fight. But, of course, there was the possibility.

Her husband was wearing his gun, after all.

“I trust you, Ben,” Sadie said.

“And I trust you, and these here Larabees. We’ve got to,” Ben said.

Sadie nodded. She did trust Ben and everyone they were with, but it wasn’t their company she was worried about.

It was Ike she didn’t trust, and it was Ike who now gave her an odd feeling in her gut.

As they turned onto his property, she felt a little uneasy. There was no turning back at this point, and as Sadie looked around to everyone, she could see how determined everyone was.

Ben was right—whatever happened, the Fieldses and the Larabees were in it together.

The group rode toward Ike's homestead slowly, careful to look in all directions in case they encountered something unexpected.

Ben felt slightly nervous, but he knew that was a good thing. He wanted to stay alert as they confronted Ike.

If he was behind this grand deception, there was no telling what he was capable of, though in his heart Ben found it hard to believe Ike would stoop so low.

But everything pointed to the opposite.

As they rode closer to the house, Ben saw Ike sitting in a rocking chair on the porch. He was smoking a cigar and rocking ever so slowly.

It looked like he was having himself a leisurely day, to be sitting at noon and having a smoke with no care in the world. Ben huffed, pleased that they were about to disrupt whatever easy day he had planned for himself.

"Ike," Ben called out as he stopped the horse right in front of the porch. He thought it best to stay on their horses as they spoke in case things went south.

"Well, howdy, Ben, Sadie, and Ma and Paw Fields. And look, Ma and Pa Larabee, too. Patrick, Nina—what brings you all out here on such a nice day? What do I owe such an honor?"

Ben watched Ike closely. He was laying on the kind welcome rather thickly given that he knew the families supposedly couldn't stand one another.

"Ike, we got a couple of questions for ya today," Patrick said. His tone wasn't harsh or accusatory, and Ben thought that was a wise choice.

Since they weren't getting off their horses, Ike was sure to suspect something, even if the mere fact that they were together wasn't a big enough hint.

"Well, certainly. Is it something I can help with? Trouble out at the ranches?"

"We did have some trouble, Ike. Both our barns burned down last night. Collapsed, and there ain't much left of either now. Us Larabees lost all of our lot of livestock," Patrick said.

Ike plastered a concerned look upon his face. "That's terrible news. How on Earth did both barns burn down? Neither is near one another, if I am recalling the properties correctly."

"That is correct," Ben started. "Fire started on our property then spread to the Larabees' pretty quickly. Not sure how it moved so fast, either," he added, folding his arms.

"There were winds last night," Ike said. "We've been forecasted winds for a few days this week. Terrible thing, really. I suppose you're both in need of some help."

"We don't need that kind of help," Patrick said, his tone flat. "We want to know the truth."

"Oh?"

"We found cigars near our barn. Looks like that's what started the fire. And I found cigars near a fence that was broken in the night.

“You’re the one we know who smokes cigars. And you’re the one who’s been playing things two-faced this entire time. Care to tell us why?” Ben asked.

Ike stood up slowly, then walked to the edge of the porch. Ben kept his hand hovering near his holster the entire time, and it seemed Ike had noticed.

“Ben, my boy, I’m surprised at you. You come to visit me and accuse me of such things, even bring your gun. This is no way to treat a family friend.”

“Just tell us the truth, Ike. We’d like to settle this in civility.”

“That’s right,” Patrick added. “Both our families deserve the truth.”

Ike puffed on his cigar and stared at Patrick for an uncomfortable amount of time. Ben was sure he was trying to unsettle everyone, so he did his best to ignore the man’s tactics.

“There’s nothing to settle; well, at least not with me. This Larabee-Fields feud has been carrying on for years, decades, I think.

“Nothing to do with me, though I must admit, I’ve lended my ear to both of your families. I felt for you both.

“It seems you’re both so intent on ruining the other that you will stop at nothing to do so. Terrible business, really.”

For the first time, Ben could see how slippery Ike was. Each time Ben had come to him in need or seen him on a happy occasion, he’d been preoccupied with the day’s events.

He’d never noticed before how the man seemed to have an agenda behind each of his words.

“Now Ike, just tell it to us straight. We don’t want any trouble,” Ben said in the firmest voice he could muster.

“I’m not the one due some trouble. Patrick here is the one who thinks you’re a lost cause at running a ranch. What was it you said, Patrick?”

“Ben will always be in the shadow of Peter when taking over the ranch,” Ike said.

Ben couldn’t help it—he was sure he went red in the face as he tried to subdue his anger at those words. They were hurtful, but Ben wasn’t stupid.

He knew what Ike was trying to do, and Ben wasn’t about to let him win.

He glanced at Patrick, who looked rather embarrassed, and tried to show him there was nothing to worry about.

“Don’t need to hear gossip, Ike. We came together to ask you to be honest with us,” he said.

“I’m always honest. That’s how honest men behave. All I’ve ever wanted was to support both your families, as it seemed you were lost to conflict.

“Always happy to be stirring up trouble on others’ properties and running to me when someone retaliated. Didn’t you understand that was exactly what would happen?”

“If you throw a stone, you’re likely to get one back,” Ike said. “And it’s usually heftier and better aimed.”

He lit another cigar and started walking the porch, and Ben was beginning to hate the man he once held so dear. He was nasty and spiteful, and it seemed he wasn’t willing to tell the truth.

Instead, he was going to stir up more trouble. And it seemed he relished it.

“Ah, Ben. Now, I recall you told me that Patrick here was nothing

more brawn. Not much going on up top, eh?” Ike chuckled at his own words.

“You weren’t too sure how Patrick was managing to pull off these midnight assaults on your ranch, given he wasn’t the brightest.

“What do you think now that he’s fooled you into coming all the way here and making a mockery of yourself?” he pressed. “Can’t be so dull, can he?”

Now Ben was embarrassed, and he pleaded with his eyes for Patrick to take no notice of Ike.

He had only said those words when he was angry over something that happened; he hadn’t meant a word of them. Luckily, Patrick seemed unfazed.

“I know what you’re doing, Ike, and you can’t just drop the act. Our families came here together and we ain’t gonna split up over some silly words,” Patrick said.

“Son, this is no act. I’ve never done anything except try to help both families try to protect their land. It was just the least I could do given that your families were intent on warring. Never seen such a thing in all my life.”

“The cigars,” Ben said. “we’re certain you have something to do with everything that is gone on. We’ve spoken now at length, and we can see the pattern.

“What happens on one ranch happens on the other, usually on the same day. How could that possibly be our doing? Neither of us can see the future.”

The more Ike spoke, the irater Ben found himself. Ike wasn’t the person he thought he was—not even close.

“Ben, I know this is going to be hard to hear, but I do need to come

clean to you,” Ike started. “Your family has struggled on their farm for quite some time—ever since you were a young boy.

“I’ve been helping them this entire time, and I continued to help them and you personally because I knew you needed it. What Patrick said was right.

“You are struggling to run that ranch well, and you will likely continue to struggle,” Ike told him. “That’s no fault of mine or the Larabees.”

“Now listen here, Ike. That’s no way to talk to my son, ya hear? You watch your words and show him some respect,” Eli called out.

Ben was hurt, but he didn’t want Ike to get the better of him. He knew what Ike was doing—trying to stoke mistrust between the families and within each person.

It was like he was shaking a tree, trying to see which fruit would fall. But luckily, Ben still had Sadie sitting behind him, and her hands hadn’t moved from his waist.

“It’s alright, Pa,” Ben said. “Ike can speak his mind. And so will I. You been engineering this entire thing, haven’t you?”

“Making it look like our families were warring when it was you breaking things and stealing things and causing all sorts of chaos. Seems you rather enjoy watching people tread water.

“Well, we aren’t having it anymore. You need to give back what you took in the last two weeks, and you owe both our families restitution for the years of damage you caused.

“Now, if you come clean, we can settle this like gentlemen and avoid getting the marshal involved. If not, well, then this is going to involve a lot less talking.”

Ike stood for a minute trying to stare Ben down, but he seemed

unbothered. Ben held the gaze until Ike broke away, shifting and puffing on his cigar as though Ben had made him sweat for a minute.

Ben figured all he needed to do was keep talking to get him to confess.

“I don’t particularly like your tone, Ben. That’s no way to be speaking to an elder,” Ike finally returned.

“What did you have to gain from ruining both our ranches? I guess you want the property, but what for?

“Is this ranch not enough, or did you just enjoy watching two families be driven to disaster, needing to sell their ranches so they weren’t left penniless? Was it sport for you?”

“Now, don’t be silly, Ben. It’s not sport for me to see anyone suffer, especially so pointlessly. You Larabees and Fieldses brought this on yourselves.

“The sooner you see that, the sooner you can put all this behind you and start over or whatever it is you need to do.

“You ran your own ranches into the ground. You did that all on your own,” he told them. “No help needed from me.”

Patrick huffed and his horse shifted about. It was clear Ike’s words were getting to him. Ben looked at him and caught his gaze, trying to calm him down.

Ike wanted them irate and feuding once again, or at least angry and left destitute. But Ben was determined both families would leave this ranch better than when they arrived.

“Just watch your words,” Patrick called out.

“Don’t you think you ought to get back out to your ranches and work the land? This is an awfully inconvenient time to be wasting. Every minute is a penny you won’t earn.”

Ike sat back down and huffed on his cigar merrily. It was grating on Ben how happy Ike was within himself and his little performance.

All he wanted was to corner him and slap the smile off his face, even if only with his words.

“There’s got to be a reason you want our land. No one would go to such trouble over so many years if they had no reason. Unless you are just a cruel hearted man underneath it all.

“No, I think something is motivating you to cause all this chaos. What is it, Ike? Is it money? If you buy the land, do you think you can sit on it till it’s worth more?

“Or is it the ranches themselves? You want to own more cattle and have a bigger operation? What is it?”

Ben felt like he was ambling close to whatever might be motivating Ike, and he was sure if he hit on just the right thing, it would throw the man off even if just momentarily.

It would be enough for Ben to notice, and then he would double down.

“Son, you’re truly putting all your eggs into the wrong basket. It might be best if we just end it here. I don’t want our family relationship to be ruined on a whim,” Ike said.

Just hearing Ike use the word ‘son’ sent chills coursing across Ben’s body. At one point, it would have meant a lot to him to hear Ike use those words, but now it was meaningless.

When all was said and done, Ben hoped he never saw the man again.

“I guess you don’t want to share why you’re after our land. So I’ll have to keep guessing. I never knew you were spending so much time by the river.

“Apparently, quite a few of us have seen you walking around the river on both sides of the property line. Why? Is it something about the river that has you entranced?”

For just a moment, the faux smile plastered on Ike’s face dropped, and Ben caught it. He had hit on something, and he needed to keep digging until Ike spilled it all.

“The river, that must be it. Is it the fish? Surely there are better spots, or do you just want the convenience at your doorstep? Hmm.”

Ben stalled for a minute, looking back toward Sadie. “Is there... gold in the river?”

Ike’s face changed and in an instant his gun was drawn. Ben didn’t have time to act; by the time his hand was near his holster, Ike had fired his gun.

The noise of the shot stunned Sadie, but the force with which Ben backed into her an instant later made her stomach turn.

Sadie had never seen gunfire before in her life, but judging by how Ben was knocked back into her and how he was now nearly slumped over, threatening to fall off the horse, she was sure he was hit by a bullet. But she didn't have time to investigate.

Ike was still standing with the gun and anything could happen.

Sadie grabbed the reins, hunched over to make herself smaller and cover Ben, and then kicked the horse to start it on its way.

She circled it back and bolted behind the nearest building, a small barn. She just needed to get Ben away from it all as more shots rang out.

From the sounds of it, a full-scale gun battle had broken out.

Once they were at the side of the barn, Sadie slowed the horse and grabbed Ben, pushing him up so he was seated against her. He was conscious, and now she could see he was holding his arm and swearing in pain.

"It hurts like hell," he breathed.

As Sadie moved his hand and inspected the wound, she was glad to see there wasn't too much blood. It seemed the bullet had either

grazed or passed through his arm entirely, and luckily missed her and horse somehow, leaving only him wounded.

It was nothing life-threatening.

“I’m just glad you’re alright.” Sadie tore at her dress to get a strip of material she could use as a makeshift bandage. “Here, it’s not great but it will do for now.”

She fastened it securely, then looked back at the house.

There, she saw chaos.

Nina was hiding at the side of the porch with her mother-in-law and Harriet Fields. Eli and the elder Larabee stood with their guns drawn while Patrick lay flat on his back.

Ike stood, waving his gun around, threatening to shoot again.

“My god,” she said.

“What is it?”

“It’s Ike. He’s truly evil. I think he shot Patrick.”

Ben twisted himself to get a look at the house and then grabbed his arm in pain once more. “That coward... whipping out a gun when we could have had a civil discussion.”

“Only a coward would hide their misdeeds to make them look like someone else did it all.”

“Well, we can’t keep hiding here,” Ben said. “That’s cowardly all the same. We gotta get back over there in case he starts shooting again.”

Sadie looked over at Ben once again. He was in no condition to be leading any attack on Ike.

“You need to get off this horse and sit down,” she ordered.

“Huh?”

“You heard me.”

Sadie dismounted first so she could help him off, then she walked him over to the side of the barn and helped him sit with his back to the wooden wall.

He was wincing and huffing in pain, and Sadie hated seeing it, but she knew she had to just keep him safe until they could get his wounds taken care of.

“Sadie, what on Earth are you doing?” Ben asked. She was grabbing at his holster.

“I’m taking your gun.”

His eyes went wide, but Sadie just narrowed hers. “Ike won’t be suspecting me. I can run in and surprise him.”

“God, Sadie, no. Please, stay here with me. Stay where it’s safe.”

Sadie put a hand to his cheek for a minute and looked into his eyes. “I’m not gonna do anything crazy. Just trust me,” she said.

As she turned to go, Ben grabbed her hand. Sadie looked back at him and smiled.

“How can you smile like that right now?” he asked.

“Because I’m with you,” was all she said.

Sadie gently slinked out of his grasp and walked back toward the horse.

She didn’t plan to ride in and shoot Ike. That would be foolish, given

she didn't know the first thing about guns. What she could do was distract him so someone else could get a shot in.

But first, she needed to watch.

Back on the horse, Sadie moved to a better vantage point where she wouldn't be spotted but where she could see clearly what was happening in front of the house.

Eli and Larabee were still standing with their guns pointed at Ike, while Patrick remained on the ground. He was moving, though, and Sadie could see he was trying to inch his way toward his gun, which now lay out of his reach.

Perhaps when he was shot, the force of it pushing him to the ground had knocked the gun out of his hand. Sadie wondered if she could gallop by and kick the gun to Patrick, but there was no easy way to make the horse do that efficiently.

Instead, she could drop the gun she held in her hands straight to Patrick so that he could make use of it. That was the best option.

Ben was going to give her hell for this at some point. He was in too much pain now to think clearly, but when he was back to his normal self, he was undoubtedly going to lecture her about being safe and doing what's appropriate for a woman.

But Sadie didn't care. She'd eat whatever crow Ben brought her way if it meant she could ensure they all got out of there alive.

There was no telling what Ike's plan was. Why he'd even shot Ben in the first place was a bit odd to her. Ben had discovered his secret, so, what, he planned to kill all six of them?

It made no sense, unless he really was that greedy of a man that he'd do anything to get what he wanted.

Perhaps Ike hadn't thought it through and was just as perturbed now

as everyone else was, stuck in a situation there was no logical end to unless someone was seriously hurt or dead.

Sadie wondered if maybe someone would've heard the shots fired and rode out to the marshal to alert him, but she had no idea how close Ike's neighbors were or if anyone would even do that.

This was the wild west Sadie had read about in newspaper clippings and penny novels. Even though she knew it existed, she never expected to experience it.

Sadie wanted to wait for the right moment to ride to Patrick. It would be ideal if Ike became momentarily distracted so she could have the entire element of surprise on her side, but she couldn't be assured of that.

He was standing watch over the men with eagle eyes, seemingly debating if he would strike again.

"We got you out numbered Ike, lower your gun," Eli yelled.

Sadie knew he was right, but Ike just wasn't the type to give up when he thought he could outwit someone. She could see that clearly now.

"Goodness me, I don't think that'll be happening. You all are trespassers on my property. I can shoot at will and face no consequences."

"Now, you sure as heck know we ain't trespassers," Eli returned.

"Ah, but isn't that in the eye of the beholder—or rather the will of the property owner? Surely only I can decide who is or isn't trespassing."

"Stop talking nonsense, Ike. It won't be working on us," Larabee said.

"You came all this way to talk to me, so let's talk. Your sons certainly had a lot to say, but now look. One's on his back and the other is missing altogether.

“Do you really think you’ll fare much better against me?” Ike threatened.

Both men were becoming angrier by the minute. Sadie watched as they steadied their guns on Ike, looking torn over whether to just shoot the man dead there and then.

She wondered why they wouldn’t, but perhaps it was because they thought he would get one more shot in before he keeled over, and they didn’t want to risk it.

“Only a coward shoots the way you did,” Eli said. “And all for gold in our river. You already got all this, Ike. Why’re so greedy? Why couldn’t you just have had a conversation with us?”

“Maybe we could’ve used your help to set up a gold operation. Instead, you chose this.”

Ike looked at the men for a minute, contemplating their words sincerely. “You know, Eli, you do have a wonderful point there.

“Had I not relished putting together a plan to make your families hate one another while acting like a little puppet master, pulling all the strings, I could have had the very conversation you suggest. Alas, it is too late now.

“But that could’ve worked, given how ignorant you and Larabee there are. Why, it could have worked rather well, really. And been whole hell of a lot less trouble.

“Ah, but what fun would there have been? I wouldn’t have seen the sad faces at my doorstep looking for handouts month in and month out.”

Sadie nearly cursed at his words. He was a contemptible human being; she was certain of that. And whatever fate befell him he would deserve it, no matter how rotten or nasty.

Sadie didn't like having these thoughts about a fellow man, but she couldn't help it. She'd never crossed paths with someone so downright evil in her entire life.

Greed was a terrible, terrible thing.

"You might not pay in this life, Ike, but you sure as heck won't miss the final judgment," the elder Larabee warned. "Nothing in this world goes unseen by Him."

"Ah, phooey. This life is all we have, and that means we must make the most of it. Don't you think?"

Larabee was so disgusted Sadie thought he might spit or swear, but instead he kept his resolve and held his gun on Ike, refusing to say anymore.

The conversation was making her ill, and she had half a mind to just gallop out now to end it, but she knew it was too risky. So, she kept waiting and watching for the right moment.

"Patrick!" Nina called out. Sadie was worried as to why Nina was calling to him, but then she noticed Patrick writhing in pain.

He had made an effort to grab the gun that was still out of reach, but he was paying for it now as he grasped at his leg and winced.

Sadie wished Nina could see her so she could wave to her to keep silent. She didn't want Ike getting any ideas about her and the other women.

Most men were at least respectable enough to leave unarmed women out of their conflicts, but Ike was clearly not the respectable type. He had made the lives of so many people sheer misery for so long, and he loved every minute of it.

Scowling, she looked at the gun she held in her hands once again. Perhaps she could figure out how to use it and aim from where she

was.

There was such a small chance of getting her aim right, but maybe it would serve as a distraction to help Eli or the elder Larabee.

Picking up the gun, she held it in her hands with her fingers on the trigger. It was too heavy for her to hold with one hand.

She lifted it to aim it at Ike but she wasn't sure she could keep it steady long enough to pull the trigger. No one had told her guns were this heavy—but maybe it was just this particular one.

Sadie tried once more and aimed it as well as she could. She could see Ike, and she could feel her fingers itching to pull the trigger.

At the last second, just as she was about to squeeze down on the trigger, she stopped herself. This wasn't what Sadie wanted, and she was sure Ben wouldn't be happy, either.

Instead, she laid the gun down on the saddle and held it with one hand, then kicked the horse straight into a gallop. She was tired of waiting, so she had to do the only thing she could.

She sped toward Patrick at an alarming pace and called out his name. If Ike wasn't already watching, he surely was now as Patrick looked up to her.

“Here!”

She tossed the gun to him and kept riding without stopping, past the house and on and on until she heard a gunshot. Slowing the horse, she circled back to take a look.

There, on the ground, Patrick lay with his arm outstretched, gun in hand. Sadie galloped back and was in time to watch Ike slowly falling to his knees as he clutched his shoulder.

“There was one thing you didn't consider,” Sadie yelled. “And that is

what happens when people stop fighting and start talking.”

Ike was staring at her but not saying a word.

“People ‘round here are gonna be doing a lot more talking. That, I can promise you.”

Like laid on the porch as Eli and the elder Larabee watched over him, their guns and now his still in hand. Ben was watching from in front of the porch, where he and Sadie now sat.

Nina and Patrick were nearby, while both boys' mothers stayed near the side of the house.

"Shall we come and help?" Harriet called to Eli.

"No, dear, let us take care of it all until someone gets the marshal here. Suppose one of us ought to ride into town to get him," Eli said.

"Don't mind at all," Larabee returned. He was just walking down the porch steps when the galloping of horse hooves filled the air.

The men took their guns out just in case, but within a few moments, it was the marshal who appeared with a deputy by his side.

"Howdy, folks, seems to be some trouble in these parts. Care to fill me in?"

"This here scoundrel is behind it all—all the trouble we both been reporting to you since forever," Eli said.

Larabee just nodded.

"How's that possible?"

“Seems the man was after gold in our shared river,” Ben said, his voice a little groggy. Sadie was sitting beside him, checking the wound in his arm.

“Well, I’ll be,” the marshal said. “And all this time I’ve been wondering what sort of crazy antics were happening at your ranches. I never suspected either of you, but none of it ever made a lick of sense.”

Ben felt annoyed at the marshal’s words. As far as he considered it, if nothing made any sense, then why didn’t he take a closer look?

Perhaps if he had done his job, something would have been discovered much sooner. Instead, it took Sadie and Nina’s smart thinking to uncover it all.

The marshal stood over Ike and looked down at him. “You been causing problems for these here people?”

Ike said nothing, but the marshal started nodding.

“I’m gonna bring him in and hold him till he gives me the full confession. Can’t see a man bothering to shoot if he had nothing to do with it all. Makes no sense.”

Soon, the marshal and his deputy hauled Ike away on horseback, leaving the Fieldses and Larabees alone on Ike’s property.

“We need to get some bourbon on your wound, but other than that I think you’ll be fine,” Sadie said.

Ben knew she was no expert, but he could tell she was determined and doing her best to check whether he needed help from someone more skilled.

“The doctor’ll be through town in just a couple days. But he’s only one town over if either of you need to go,” Harriet said.

She didn't seem too concerned about him, but he noticed she was looking with worry at Patrick, who was leaning on Nina as he sat. His jeans were soaked with blood, and his injury looked much worse than Ben's.

"Patrick, should we go? Only one town over. Maybe an hour or a little more. We can come back with the wagon," Nina suggested, nearly pleading with him.

Patrick just nodded his head and winced again.

"I'll go get my wagon for ya, and I can take us over to the next town," Eli offered.

The Larabees were taken aback by this, and everyone fell silent for a minute.

"That's awfully generous of you, Eli, but there's no need. We can take our wagon out with him," Nina said.

"Well, I thought you might want to ride in back with him, you see. Every moment is precious at these times," Eli said with some reverence.

Everyone fell quiet again, understanding the meaning of those words.

Ben thought about Peter and how his dad had stayed by his bedside right until the end and then long afterward. Looking at Patrick, Ben didn't immediately think his life was in danger, but he could see the care in both his father and mother's faces.

They didn't see it rationally; they only saw a bad injury and the chance that life could be cut short so unexpectedly. And they didn't want the Larabees to miss a moment of time with Patrick, just in case.

"Please, let us go get the wagon while you two stay here with Patrick. We'll come back and all head to the next town together," Harriet said.

Her voice was so soft and kind; Ben hadn't heard it like that in too long—possibly not since Peter was still alive.

The Larabees were clearly finding it a difficult decision to make. They just weren't sure if they should accept this kind of help from the Fields family of all people.

But after a few minutes of glances amongst themselves, the elder Larabee turned and shook Eli's hand. "We'd be mighty glad to take you up on that offer."

Eli gripped his hand with a kind smile, and Ben felt his eyes well with tears. He looked away, wanting to compose himself but also not wanting to be seen.

There was something overwhelming now about being here with the Larabees and seeing the families mending their relationship.

So much of Ben's life had been spent in strife with the Larabees as a target. And now, here they were accepting a kind gesture from his parents at a vulnerable time.

Sadie took his hand and squeezed it, then gave him a knowing glance. It was remarkable, but it seemed as though Sadie could almost read his thoughts.

She knew exactly what he needed, too.

"We'll be back in no time. Please, just rest here," Harriet said. She and Eli mounted a horse together and galloped off in haste.

"Quite the parents you got there," Patrick said. His voice was weak and gravelly.

"Sure are," Ben returned with a smile.

He couldn't help remembering the day he and Patrick had last played together.

It had been a hot, sunny afternoon wherein the two had tried to play their games in the shade as much as they could. They used to laugh together a lot, and especially laugh at their parents.

Ben could remember it now so clearly, but he was sure that if he had tried to recall it only a few days ago, it would have been impossible.

He just hoped that over time, the rest of the memory would fade—the part where their parents separated and chastised them, making them each promise to never play with one another again—and it would be outshined by their laughter in the shade.

That was how he wanted life to be now.

Fewer arguments and screaming matches. No accusations and confrontations. If the cattle got out, well then so be it, but it was no one's fault but their own or just some bad luck.

He was squeezing Sadie's hand as he held those hopes in his mind, but he couldn't help wanting this all for Sadie, too.

Ben wanted her to get the community she so desired, and he hoped that while it was rather dramatic, the past day might have been an honest beginning to that.

Maybe, with the feud over with and the truth exposed, the town itself might grow closer and livelier. He was sure Sadie would keep trying, and he hoped now there would be nothing standing in her way.

As the Larabees all huddled around Patrick, Ben thought that maybe they should give them some privacy. He asked Sadie to help him to his feet, and the two went on a short walk.

It was odd still being on Ike's property. They had no intention of leaving until they knew that Patrick and the rest were on their way to the next town, but it was still a little eerie.

The man Ben had trusted with his life had turned out to be the one

who'd wished him dead in the end. It was a painful irony.

Slowly, Sadie and Ben walked side by side around Ike's homestead. He could tell she was also feeling odd, so he broke the silence.

"As soon as the others are on their way, we can head home. It should be too long."

Sadie just nodded. She suddenly seemed unusually quiet.

"Sadie, what is it?"

"Nothing, it's just—"

Ben could see the tears welling in the corners of her eyes.

"Sadie," he said. They stopped and stood facing one another.

"I just... I know I probably seemed brave and out of my mind, bringing you to safety and then running off to hand Patrick a gun, but I was terrified the entire time.

"It was sort of like my body just took over and made me do things, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I was screaming."

Ben brought her close for an embrace with his good arm. "You were brave. And I can't believe you did that for Patrick. You saved us all."

"Well, I don't know about that."

"I sure do," he said. "You're a formidable woman, in every possible way."

"I was worried about you, too," Sadie confessed. She was looking up into his eyes with a hint of sadness.

"But I'm going to be just fine."

"I know, but what if you weren't? You know? I was just acting without thinking, hauling you away. I didn't know what I would find when I got you to safety."

She was endearing, even like this. Ben knew he was head over heels for her. With a smile, he kissed her, then wiped the tears from her eyes.

"You're stuck with me. Better get used to it," he said.

"I want to be stuck with you forever," she said tearfully. Ben could see she was at least smiling again.

"Sadie, I love you. And we have our whole lives ahead of us. It's not gonna be easy, but I think maybe there won't be any more days as hard as this one."

"I love you, too," Sadie said, lifting onto her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his lips.

As odd as it was given all that had happened that day, Ben was feeling lucky. Lucky to have Sadie by his side and smitten with him, and lucky to have a new future to look forward to.

He had no idea if the gold Ike was obsessed over was real, but the man must have had good reason to think there was a fair bit present to carry out the plan as he did.

Of course, there was always the possibility that Ike was truly unbalanced and merely got carried away playing them like puppets. But it didn't matter.

With Ike in the marshal's custody, they could set about claiming for some sort of restitution. The ranch hadn't seen its last days, at least not yet.

"Sadie," Ben said. They had finally stopped locking lips. "I'm a better man because of you." He was pushing her hair behind her ears as he

said it.

“Ben...”

“I mean it. I’m a heck of a lot less stubborn and probably miles easier to be around. I’ve become closer to the person I’ve always wanted to be, and that’s because of you coming here and being yourself. Thank you.”

It was a little awkward to directly thank her, but Ben couldn’t help himself. He wanted to tell Sadie exactly how he felt regardless of how it sounded. She deserved to know it all.

“But I feel like I’m the one who should be thanking you,” she returned. “I have a family now, a home to call my own and a community. People who know me and can count on me.

“These are the things I dreamed of as a little girl, and now they’re all mine.”

Ben could see how pleased and happy she was, and it made him all the happier.

“And what’s more... I’m married to someone who loves and respects me. You listen to me, and you take my ideas and what I have to say seriously.

“In this world, that’s more than a lot of people ever get,” she said, “especially women like me.”

“Oh, Sadie.”

The tips of her ears looked red, and Ben could tell that was because she had been terribly open and honest with him.

“I will always listen to you, and I’m only sorry I didn’t believe you the first time you told me. Maybe we could have saved ourselves a whole lot of trouble.”

“Let’s not dwell on regret. And I liked that you challenged me. We both need to always have our own minds about things otherwise we’ll become so agreeable everything will be a bore,”

Sadie laughed. “But the point is that you did listen to me, and we did our best with the information we had at the time. No one could have predicted any of this.”

Ben looked around the property once more. He hated that they were having such a meaningful moment on Ike’s land, but it didn’t really matter, not in the grand scheme of things.

What mattered was that they were still with each other as a team, fighting for what they wanted in life. If they could survive this, then surely their marriage could survive anything.

“Should we keep walking?” Sadie asked.

“Let’s keep walking,” Ben returned.

It didn’t matter where they walked as long as Ben had Sadie by his side.

Six years had passed when Ben was riding through the lush fields surrounding his home on horseback. The ride was a special one that had him smiling widely.

On the horse sitting in front of him was Crystal, Nina and Patrick's daughter. He was giving her a horseback riding lesson, and she had been giddy and excited the whole time.

Patrick rode up to the side of his horse, grinning as well. "Alright, my girl, it's time to get washed up and help your mother in the kitchen."

Patrick grabbed Crystal and seated her on his horse in front of him.

"Now, what do you say to Uncle Ben?"

Crystal turned to him shyly. "Thank you, Uncle Ben."

"That's right. Now, y'all coming over for dinner tonight? Nina has been cooking all afternoon and there's plenty to go around."

Ben looked around and saw his parents sitting under a plum tree, arm in arm.

"We certainly will. Wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Alrighty then," Patrick said before trotting off with Crystal.

Ever since the day on Ike's ranch, things had changed drastically.

Their families hadn't become the best of friends overnight—it took time and patience, but soon there was so much trust built up between the two families that everything had started to come naturally.

After his parents drove the Larabees to the next town over so Patrick could see the doctor, they'd stayed on in the town until they were sure he would make it and be discharged.

That had touched the Larabees so that they had invited the family over for dinner once Patrick was back on his feet. The dinner had been a little awkward at first, but by the end of the night they had shared many laughs.

Over the years, the families began to rely on one another, especially when the gold was confirmed in the river. They had needed to work together to pan the river and then compromise to split the profits evenly.

Both the families just wanted enough to recoup what they lost from Ike's horrible deeds.

Ike had gone to jail and was even sent to a larger prison many towns away, but because his wife still lived on his homestead and wasn't implicated in his scheme, the marshal didn't feel right about stripping her of any assets.

Instead, he'd let the families look through the ranch for any livestock or items they could rightfully claim as their own, but both families came up empty handed.

They never found out how Ike was able to sell their livestock so quickly, but it didn't matter. Both wanted to move on as quickly as they could, and focusing on the gold in the river proved to be the best method.

And they had made the wisest decision.

Later that afternoon, Ben sat with Sadie dangling their toes in the

river. The water was cool despite the hot day and they both found it refreshing.

They loved to find time to do this ever since the river had brought them good fortune. It was almost as though they were tapping into that good fortune or reconnecting themselves with optimism.

The river had provided an abundance of wealth for both families. Not only had they been able to rebuild their barns and replace all the livestock taken over the years, but they were able to improve just about everything and begin living in a style they never thought possible.

The Fieldses kept things simple, but they enjoyed a few luxuries, like being able to hire ranch hands to help out around the ranch or the occasional staff member to help with the house when Harriet or Sadie needed it.

Despite their upgraded homes and well-cared-for gardens and crops, the most notable addition sat above the river itself. It was a little bridge that connected the two properties.

It meant no more wading through the water to reach the other side or needing to go on horseback. And it meant the children could play with one another easily and safely.

They just needed to be reminded regularly there was to be no running on the bridge.

Ben was happier now than he had ever thought possible. Back when Sadie had first joined him and his family, he'd just wanted to grow as a person—to become more like Peter and less like himself.

But with everything that happened, something changed within Ben. He may have become a bit more like Peter, but he had become more confident as himself.

He no longer viewed his reluctance to act as a bad thing. Instead, he

appreciated his thoughtfulness and caution and knew when to balance it.

He needed it to analyze situations and take the best action, not to stay in the limbo of possibilities.

And Ben had never realized just how much he needed a community until Sadie had come around. He'd always had his family, and he'd always considered that was more than enough.

Yet, Sadie had shown him just how wrong he'd been. It was a sense of community that had allowed the Fieldses to realize that the feud wasn't as it seemed.

And afterward, it was the community support that had allowed them to prosper. Old customers returned, happier than before to do business with both them and the Larabees.

Things just felt different; in some ways, the entire town seemed different.

Ben leaned over and kissed Sadie. The two fell into a passionate embrace for a moment and then broke away.

"What was that for?" Sadie asked.

"Just 'cause," Ben returned. He was grinning foolishly, but he didn't care. Sadie was his sunshine, his best friend, his partner when it came to just about everything.

And Ben wouldn't have wanted it any other way. She had the optimism he sometimes lacked and the forwardness he sometimes practiced.

They balanced each other out well, and Ben just thought it was more of the luck that flowed in the river where they dipped their toes.

Of all the ads she could have answered, Sadie had picked his. Ben

didn't want to think too hard about what might have happened if fate hadn't intervened.

"Sun'll be setting soon," she said.

"Mmhhh, we need to go get ready for dinner at the Larabees'."

Sadie smiled and nodded, clearly not wanting to take her toes out of the river just yet.

"How was the riding lesson with Crystal?"

"Oh, just fine. She seems much more confident with the reins. And she giggled a lot more this time. I think she's getting comfortable."

"I'm so glad you have this time with her," Sadie said.

"I am, too. These are things that kids remember, and I want her to know that she has a community that cares for her."

"An uncle," Sadie corrected.

"That, too."

"Say, when did you become so community-minded, anyhow?" Sadie asked.

Ben knew she was being facetious, but he wanted to answer her anyway because it was on his mind. Things had changed so drastically when they were able to stop fighting with the Larabees, and some days he just thought about it all in wonder.

"When I was in town yesterday, Cecile stopped to talk to me. Asked after you and the kids, then asked after the Larabees."

"She did?" Ben knew she would be surprised. "Cecile has always been a member of the quilting bee, but she's always been a bit funny about Nina and me."

“She didn’t even know much about the feud until it was all over,” Sadie explained.

“Well, I think she might be over all that. There wasn’t a hint of wariness in her voice as we talked. But it just goes to show what damage gossip can do to a community—a few fibs here and there, or focus on the wrong thing, and relationships become strained.”

Sadie nodded. “When I found out that the women at the quilting bee thought Nina and I had faked our entire friendship to try and get information for our families to fuel the feud, I was so angry.

“It felt like a betrayal, but I understand it more now. None of us talked honestly with one another. And sure, it was quilting bee, for gosh sakes, but it was still a social occasion.

“If someone had just asked us something—anything—we could have set the record straight. Instead, it came out months later and the bee was awkward for weeks because of that.”

“Seems like all this social stuff comes with bumps in the road. Building a relationship with anyone takes time, and it’s not without mistakes.”

“You sound so wise, Ben,” Sadie teased.

“Hey,” he said as he kissed her again.

Ben was pleased he had learned how to make friends and acquaintances in his community through his social butterfly of a wife. Before things had come to a head with Ike, Ben had never seen being social as a good use of time.

He liked to give time to the ranch and his family, and he fulfilled all his social needs with them. It wasn’t perfect, but he’d thought that was being a good family man.

Now, Ben understood that although cherishing his family may have

been his most important endeavor, having a social life and building community were two important things that went hand in hand.

He needed to know more than one neighbor and preferably not fight with any. And he needed to know a little more about the people who ran important businesses in town, like the blacksmith and the owner of the general store.

He'd done business with both for years, but had never bothered to learn the names of their kids or why they'd opened the businesses that they did.

Just a little time and effort here and there gave great dividends. Ben found himself looking forward to visiting towns for errands that were once drudgery.

Pleasant talks and updated news about their families made the work seem like a social occasion. And his new attitude improved his business.

He was selling more at a better price to the general store than he ever had, and easily making acquaintances who turned out to be purchasers or who knew business owners in need of certain things.

He and Sadie stood from the river and held hands as they headed home to change for supper at the Larabees'. That night, it would be the whole family that joined—both sets of parents and all the kids, too.

Ben loved how full the house got when they were all together. In truth, he was coming to view the Larabees as family after everything they'd been through.

When he'd once trusted Ike with his life and been terribly wrong, now Ben was more than confident he could trust the Larabees with the lives of any of his family members.

Both families had proved as much to each other.

“What do you think Nina made for supper tonight?” Sadie asked, swinging their hands back and forth.

“Oh, I don’t know. She’s become quite the cook. Maybe beef wellington or some sort of tarte.”

“Either would be delicious. I just love everything she makes. And, you know, she makes so much bread each week, I haven’t had to bake a loaf myself in what feels like years.”

“Ah, so is that why our bread tastes so delicious these days?”

“Hey!” Sadie called out, pretending to whack Ben’s arm.

“The orchard you planted is really coming along,” he said.

Sadie hummed in agreement. “I know the work will be worth it. A few fruit orchards will keep the ranch in great shape, especially since those at Ike’s were vandalized.”

One of the oddest things that happened in the wake of Ike’s imprisonment was an attack on the man’s ranch. Only his wife and her staff had remained, and she wasn’t capable of taking care of the operation itself.

Ben had heard she planned to hire ranch hands to help, and he had even offered to visit with her and help with what he could and help her understand what she needed to hire staff for.

He understood when she declined, but when he heard that most of the orchards had been destroyed, his heart sank.

The trees were the only thing she could have easily tended to as far as he was concerned; she would have just needed help harvesting the fruit once it was ready.

Yet now there wouldn’t be much to harvest for years, given the state of the trees.

“Did the marshal ever find out who did that?” Sadie asked. It was only recently that the two had been speaking at length about Ike and everything that happened.

For so many years they had wanted to forget it all, almost as if it had been a bad dream they and the entire community had woken up from.

“The marshal told me in confidence that he thinks his wife did it herself. He said she was driven crazy by her anger over his actions and the guilt she felt. The marshal kept telling her she had nothing to feel guilty for, but it seemed she was full of empathy over what happened.”

“Maybe we should make a visit to her,” Sadie suggested. Ben stopped walking immediately.

“Is that something you’d really want to do?”

She smiled gently. “If it would bring her peace, then yes. That’s not a place I ever thought I’d willingly go again, but I don’t like the idea of one more person suffering because of his actions. It’s bad enough that no one in town wants anything to do with the poor woman.”

Sometimes, Ben couldn’t believe how big Sadie’s heart was. She was capable of so much love—much more than he, Ben was sure—and he just followed her example.

If Sadie wanted to find a way to bring some healing to Ike’s wife and help her reintegrate with the community, he would be there at her side to do just that.

He loved Sadie dearly and couldn’t be prouder to have a woman like her as his wife.

That week's quilting bee was back at Cecile's house once again, and the ladies had each begun a brand-new quilt.

The group had made several quilts over the years that Sadie had lived in Cottonwood Springs, but it was something she never tired of. And she was glad that the regulars never tired of it either, it seemed.

Just like at every session, sitting beside Sadie was Nina. The two had not only recovered their friendship after the difficult events six years ago, but they had grown to be ever so close.

In some ways, Sadie felt Nina was like a long-lost sister. She could share anything with her, and she was sure Nina felt the same.

"Oh, Sadie, that fabric is to die for. Where did you get it?"

"We ordered it from the East. It came all the way from France, or so they say."

"My goodness, France? I can't imagine Patrick thinking that was practical in the least."

"For some reason, Ben thinks French fabrics have the best price," she said, winking at Nina.

A good-natured fib was all Sadie stretched to these days. She hadn't kept a single thing hidden from Ben since she had kept her friendship with Nina a secret.

Looking back on things, Sadie wondered if that had been the wisest decision and what would have happened if Ben had known she was becoming friendly with Nina immediately.

Part of the problem was that Sadie hadn't known Nina was Nina Larabee until the friendship had already bloomed.

If she had told Ben, Sadie wondered if Ben might have forbidden her from having her at the quilting bee or stopped her from attending herself.

Yet Sadie knew her husband really wasn't that kind of person. He would have been mad at her and worried about how the relationship would affect the family, but Sadie couldn't see him ever stopping her from doing something she loved. That just wasn't Ben.

The most difficult conversation Sadie had encountered after the night the barns burned down was with Harriet.

Ben had expressed to her before that his parents would likely take her friendship with Nina as a grave insult, but Sadie had hoped the situation would've made it clear that Sadie had good reason to trust Nina.

But once the dust had settled and Sadie had begun helping Harriet in the house once more, Harriet had confronted her.

"Sadie, why didn't you tell me about Nina Larabee?"

Sadie hadn't known how to answer her except to tell the stark truth. "I thought you would be mad at me and maybe even lose trust in me.

"I didn't set out to become Nina's friend; it happened naturally. We were both so shocked as we walked home and realized we were who we were."

"It's not that, Sadie. I know you saw some awful fights between Eli and me from the moment you arrived, but I thought we had built up

some trust. You know, a womanly trust.”

It was then that Sadie had realized something that wasn't at all obvious. Despite all the complaining and ranting about the Larabees, Harriet was still her own person.

Maybe she had seemed obsessed to Sadie, but that was just the life that she was used to living. And Sadie had never even considered confiding in Harriet.

She had felt ashamed once she'd realized.

“I'm well aware of what we must have looked like to you, all three of us. You must have thought we were a bit bonkers about the whole thing. And I don't blame you for that.

“But I know as a wife, there will be times when there's something you can't tell your husband. And not because you don't want to, but because you can't or at least not at the time.

“I just want you to know you can come to me, and I'll never share what you tell me in confidence,” Harriet promised her. “Not with Eli, nor Ben nor anyone else.”

Sadie felt like her relationship with Harriet had begun anew that day. She had felt thankful that Harriet had considered her situation so thoughtfully and that she had extended her such grace.

Sadie had seen Harriet at her worst dueling with the Larabees, and yet she was still extending her such a courtesy. Sadie felt lucky to have such a strong woman in her life.

The only other strong woman she had known was her mother, Vera. And now, of course, the Larabee women.

“Sadie, didn't you say today was the day?” Nina asked.

“I sure did,” Sadie replied. “Darlings, why don't we get ready to go?”

At her feet sat their son and daughter, Vera-Lynn and Eli Jr. Sadie always brought them to the bees when they could so they could meet and play with other children in the town, but also so they could get to know some of the other adults, too.

She wanted her kids to be adept at social interaction from a young age. It was something she had never had a chance at—growing up in one town where she could really be known and feel connected. And that was all she wanted for them.

When they became adults, they might choose to leave or follow their own opportunities in life, but that was something Sadie could accept.

She wanted her children to follow their dreams, just as she had. Until then, she wanted to give them the best start in life she could.

The children rushed to gather their toys and put their overcoats on as Sadie packed up her sewing materials. She'd barely made a dent in the new square she'd started, but it didn't matter.

Today was indeed a special day as they needed to rush home to greet a special person.

"Take care, Nina," Sadie said as she left, squeezing her hand.

As she and the children said their goodbyes, Sadie felt a burst of butterflies in her stomach. Despite everything, she was a little nervous.

The ride home felt anxious to Sadie, but she tried to quell her thoughts. There was no use in fretting when they'd be home in a matter of minutes and the hard moment would pass.

And Sadie didn't even know if it would be that hard; she hoped it was full of joy.

As they rounded the trail that led down to their homestead, Sadie could already see four figures standing in front of the house, no doubt

waiting to greet them at their earliest possible chance.

“Darlings, are you ready?”

The kids squealed and hummed in excitement as Sadie brought the wagon to a stop.

Carefully but with haste, she helped the two kids down who suddenly became a little shy as the new person approached the wagon. Sadie bent over to speak to both of them.

“Don’t you remember? This is Grandma, my mother. She’s your family. Don’t be scared.”

Sadie took their hands and walked them over to Vera, who was so excited her hands were covering a gigantic smile.

“My goodness, li'l ones. Aren’t you a sight for the sorest eyes?”

Sadie hadn’t heard her mother’s voice in six years, and so much had happened in her life since then. She’d achieved everything she’d set out to achieve, and it was only then that the gap in her life and heart had become painfully obvious.

Sadie had been the one to reach out first, and the first several letters she’d sent were not returned. And Sadie understood why; she accepted it.

She had left against her mother’s wishes and hurt her terribly. And even though it hurt Sadie, too, it wasn’t the same.

Sadie had left to follow her heart and her dreams, but she had left her mother all alone.

In her letters, Sadie gave her apologies to Vera, but she was careful to say that she didn’t regret her decision, only that it meant she’d had to leave her.

Sadie wanted her to know she was sorry, but she never asked for forgiveness. Instead, she had hoped that Vera might accept her decision and see how happy she had become.

And, over time, she had.

It took a lot of convincing and even a few letters from Harriet Fields before Vera had agreed to come live on the ranch in one of the newly built homes.

In all the years Sadie was gone, Vera hadn't stopped traveling. She couldn't name all the cities she'd lived in or all the jobs she'd taken, but Sadie had just hoped she could put it all behind her and come to Cottonwood Springs.

And she had.

Tears filled Sadie's eyes as she hugged her mother for the first time in years. And they hugged with the children at their feet for quite some time.

When they finally let go, Vera's hands went straight to Sadie's long locks in ringlets.

"Look at you, my girl. You're a fancy girl now."

"Hardly. Just a rancher's wife," Sadie returned, wiping her tears away.

"I'm proud of you," Vera said.

Sadie nodded, not able to speak as her emotions got the better of her. Finally, all she said was, "Welcome home."



Later that night, Ben and Sadie sat by the river watching their children play with the Larabee children. They were running into the river and splashing one another then running out and laughing. It was

a cute game until they took to the bridge.

“Uh-uh,” Sadie called. “No running on that bridge, please.”

The kids minded her words and slowed down, heading back to the river where they could splash around and be more rambunctious.

Ben took Sadie’s hand and they smiled at one another. The day was ending so peacefully, as it so often did lately for them.

Vera and the Fieldses were not far away, talking under the lone plum tree that was the first Sadie ever planted. It was a favorite spot of the couples, and Sadie was happy they were sharing it with her mother.

She hoped her mother would be happy in Cottonwood Springs and with life on the farm, but that was up to Vera. Sadie knew that.

“What are you thinking about?” Ben asked.

“Oh, not too much, just a little of everything with a dash of worry,” Sadie confessed.

“Vera is going to be fine. She’s here now, and we can let the community do the rest. You’ve got another bee coming up in a few days, don’t you?”

“We do... a few of the women are anxious to pick up the pace before winter sets in, and considering it’s summer, I think they’re a little over prepared, but I’d never say no to an extra meeting. It’s such precious time.”

Ben kissed her hand then laced his fingers with hers. This was exactly how Sadie liked to end her days. She couldn’t think of anything that could possibly improve on it.

“Ben, Sadie,” a voice called. Across the river stood Nina and Patrick, who were waving at the two as they headed for the bridge.

“Is that a picnic basket in Nina’s hand?” Ben asked. Sadie could sense the delightful urgency in his voice.

“I do think it is,” Sadie replied with a smile. Nina just couldn’t stop cooking, and Sadie had her suspicions already.

With both of her pregnancies, Nina had become a super-nester, baking and cooking nonstop from the point of inception well into the pregnancy.

She only seemed to stop once she was too tired to executive her recipes. And Ben and Sadie were the lucky recipients of all her kitchen’s overflow.

As the couple neared, Sadie couldn’t help thinking just how lucky they were. This was just about as close to perfect as any life could be.